UNDER A THOUSAND EYES

FLORENCE BINGHAM LIVINGSTON

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Under a Thousand Eyes

HEATHER FELT SURE THAT BOOTH RANSOME HAD SET THE FIRE.

Under a Thousand Eyes

By

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Heather Felt Sure that Booth Ransome Had Set the Fire . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

Heather Knew that Many Eyes Were Turned upon Her 98

Grandma Davenway Disapproved of Restlessness and Vacations 232

"I'm Not Laughing at You, Heather; I'm Loving You" 454

Under a
Thousand Eyes

UNDER A THOUSAND EYES

CHAPTER I

IT had been a hot, uncomfortable trip, but at last Heather Davenway was approaching Hampton Valley, the small Vermont town in which she had been born. She was coming back for a definite object and with definite plans for gaining it. Being young, she was full of courage; being full of courage, she believed in her own powers.

"I shall have no difficulty at all," she told herself serenely. "When mother understands what it will mean, she'll be glad to leave. There's nothing to hold her now—nothing."

This was before Heather had reached the village.

Meantime Hampton Valley, unconscious of the invincible force about to invade it, was placidly baking in the heat of early afternoon. It was only June, but the season had been precocious. In the heart of the village the asphalt sidewalks were rapidly reverting to their original fluidity, so that Lem Tripe, pacing off the fifty yards between his barber shop and the post office, did it stickily, as a bug drags itself through a drop of molasses. The air on Railroad Street was heavy with distilled odors from the stores that outlined it. No panting wayfarer could miss the fact that Abner Rider had a stock of over-ripe bananas

and that Bean Brothers were still prepared to furnish salt salmon, recently popular but now hard hit by Fahrenheit.

As if to preserve the peace unbroken, the Broomfield train ambled into the village by easy stages and with surprising economy of bell and whistle. Nosing through the valley mainly to suck in empty milk cans from the scattered stations, it incidentally tolerated such passengers as were not in a hurry or were incapacitated for walking. Even then, it could hardly be said to carry them; rather, it lurched them from side to side of the stuffy, dusty coaches, and ultimately by a longitudinal shudder ejected them upon some weather-beaten platform, differentiated from a thousand other platforms only by the number of miles from the nearest center of civilization.

Heather was the only arrival this afternoon. She walked briskly down the platform to the baggage room and left her trunk check and her bag with Si Hoyt, delivery to be made at such time as said Si became rested from the exertion of waiting for the Broomfield train and should feel the feeble stirring of activity within his becalmed nature.

"Any time before night, Si," directed the girl, with a smile that held the key to Mr. Hoyt's struggle between economic necessity and the seductiveness of inertia. Si's fear was not so much that the laboring classes might be shorn of their dominion as that they might be forced to live up to their name. He shifted the toothpick in his wide mouth and leaned comfortably against a packing-box. A good-natured chuckle shook his body, not unlike a seed cucumber in general contour.

"I swan, you got some airs down to New York, didn't you, Heather?" he drawled. "Orderin' me 'round like I didn't own my home on Willer Street!" Having delicately urged his claim to equality, Mr. Hoyt turned politely to strictly conversational topics.

"You've been gone quite a spell, hain't you? Few of us was talkin' it over th'other day. I 'llowed 'twas seven year, but Ezry Sykes, he says it's eight. Says you left eight year ago come December, 'cause 'twas the same month his last horse broke his leg and had to be shot."

With a smile the girl acknowledged the scientific feat in this association of ideas. "Yes, we left about the same time—Mr. Sykes's horse and I. But I haven't been in New York ever since, you know. I was in the West for five years."

"Ya-uh, I rumember." Mr. Hoyt removed the toothpick, considered it thoughtfully, and thrust it into a fresh location between his teeth—he was taking them in pairs, in a manner at once leisurely and systematic. "How does little old Hampton look to you? Huh?"

The girl seemed about to reply; then her lips closed on a tactful smile. Measuring glances with the slouchily comfortable Mr. Hoyt, she seemed as much out of place as a tropical bird that has winged into a region of barren ground and leafless trees. So far from being quenched by the heat, she had the sort of vitality that floats buoyantly above the reach of weather. Her clear skin had the glow of wholesome youth, and there was vigor in the sheen of her chestnut hair, rippling abundantly over her ears. Her chief beauty was a pair of large dark eyes, alert with interest but at times capable of a baffling expression. Under arched brows

they had a way of lengthening their focus suddenly, as if they were caught and held by distant dreams.

She was wearing smart low shoes and a sand-colored gown, simple but up to the next minute in modishness. Her small hand-blocked hat, accented by a single feather, was about to be the despair of Mrs. Warren Buttles, Hampton Valley's leading milliner, in semi-annual and supposedly personal touch with the New York market, advance spring and fall showing of ladies' and children's hats, bring in your own trimmings if you wish.

"'S all right," continued Mr. Hoyt, satisfied with the effect he had produced. He removed the toothpick again, decided that it was not too frayed for further service, and put it into the pocket of his gingham shirt. "You'll get your airs taken out of you soon 'nough. Guess your ma's a-needin' you, ain't she?"

With an added glow in her smooth cheeks, Heather Davenway hurried down the sun-baked platform and started up Railroad Street. Mrs. Fuller, leaning over her porch above the hardware store, threw her a careless nod, as if she had left town only yesterday. Sam Hillock, seeking ventilation in the open doorway of the Quick Lunch, greeted her with the straight-out-from-the-eye gesture by which the older generation expresses its opinion of this urban notion of lifting hats to ladies, proving itself capable of the muscular requirements, but deterred by inner convictions.

At the post office she encountered Lem Tripe, who, having decided not to make the journey back to his shop until after the mail was changed, had propped his tall, lean figure against the building in the shade

of an awning. His pale, gaunt face was moist from the heat, but he was scrupulously shaven and shorn and his brown hair was heavily brilliantined. Lem remembered always that he was a barber and never stirred forth except as his own advertisement.

"Why, hello, Heth!" he exclaimed. "Who knew you was comin'? And, I declare, if you don't look as cool as cukies! Howja manage it?"

The girl laughed. "The town does seem to be prostrated."

Mr. Tripe nodded lugubriously. "I gol, it's hot. Unseason'ble, that's what 'tis. Bound to be sickness after it, 'specially among the babies, and we got an extra crop of 'em this year. Don't seem more'n last week when you was one yourself. 'Member the day I cut your curls off? I says to you, says I: 'Now, Heth, if you'll just hold a mite stiller——' "

"Oh, that was a long time ago, Mr. Tripe," interrupted the girl, edging away. "The curls have grown out again—and my name is Heather."

"Say, tell it to Hampton!" advised the jocular Mr. Tripe.

"It won't be exactly easy," reflected Heather grimly, as she turned the corner, "but it's one thing I intend to do."

Her thoughts switched anxiously to her mother, whom she had not seen since October, when she had been called home by her father's death. She had been dwelling more and more on her mother's loneliness until she had realized that she must come back and arrange their lives more satisfactorily.

Her breath quickened as she came in sight of the big old house on Checker Street, set well back from the

row of shady maples by the sidewalk. It looked just the same—— No, something was different. A girl banged the screen door from the dining-room and fluttered down the steps. Daphy Giddings!

Heather gasped. What was Daphy doing there, banging doors as if she owned them? Wild conjectures flashed through her mind as Miss Daphne Giddings floated down the walk and through the worn picket gate.

"Hello, Heather," cried Daphy in mild surprise.

"Good afternoon, Daphy."

Miss Giddings rippled with giggles. "Oh Lord!" she choked. "What're you giving me? Some of the manners you brought along for the Fifth Avenue of Hampton Valley, I s'pose. You always were stuck-up, Heather. But never mind; you'll come down a peg all right. See if you don't."

Heather stared, frightened in spite of herself. Si Hoyt's warning had seemed a random remark, but Daphy's had the maliciousness of knowledge withheld. The two girls had never liked each other, and it was true that Heather had felt superior, but now she was conscious of being at a disadvantage.

Daphy was absorbed in an appraisal of costumes, with conclusions obviously gratifying. She was cool and spring-like in white muslin with an apple-green sash; she was jaunty in the assurance of her own charm. Her light hair was waved and puffed to a compelling degree; no pencil had been spared to bring out the expressiveness of her blue eyes; and her giggles revealed the whiteness of her small teeth. Hampton Valley agreed that Daphy "had looks," and Daphy knew it. She also knew the companion statement,

"Daphy's brains never'll kill her;" but so far from worrying her, this merely removed one danger from her young life and left her the freer.

Heather assumed composure. "Were you calling on mother?" she inquired.

"Calling on her!" repeated Daphy explosively. "Yeh, I should say! I call on her all the time now—from morning till night."

Heather's dark eyes widened with perplexity, but pride forbade further questions. With a nod, she started on.

Daphy wheeled, a prey to ready giggles. "Say, Heather, are you pretending, or what? Didn't you know ma and I were boarding to your house now? Oh, well, if you're in a hurry, don't mind me. See you at supper time, anyhow."

Heather stopped short, with her hand on the latch of the gate. Boarding! That one word turned her sick with alarm and premonition. What could this mean? And why hadn't her mother told her? She could have sent part of her salary. . . .

A faint sound from Daphy, like the echo of a giggle, roused Heather to the fact that she was still under scrutiny. Controlling herself with an effort, she banged through the gate and hurried up the gravel path.

But when she had bounded up the steps, she stopped again. At the end of the porch in the shade of a new awning sat a man, evidently interrupted in the reading of a book, which he held lazily in thick red fingers. His bold dark eyes met her gaze coolly. She knew he had been watching her panicky entrance; doubtless he had been amused. She hated thick red fingers; she hated bold black eyes; particularly she hated Board-

ers. Probably the house was full of them. She had thought she was coming home, but this was no longer home; neither was it the field for the ambitious plans that had lured her back.

Struggling with anger and dismay, she made a dive through the screen door and flew from room to room in search of her mother. Mrs. Davenway was not there. But she couldn't have gone far, Heather reflected, as she came into the kitchen for the second time.

There was a hot fire in the range. The large old-fashioned room was suffocating from the heat within and the heat without, and yet delicious with the odors of fresh baking. Pans of cookies, just out of the oven, jostled one another on the warming-shelf; two layer cakes, rakish with chocolate frosting, stood on the molding-board; on the table were five loaves of bread, bumpy and fragrant under a white cloth. Mrs. Davenway was a famous cook. Her skill, directed to preparing for her daughter's return, would have been one of the comforts of home-coming; but there was something vulgar in these quantities of food, suggestive of hungry hordes invading sacred ground and chinking down money for the privilege of gobbling, fatuously trying to buy what cannot be bought, grasping for that fine essence of home that is too volatile to be caught and bartered away.

The girl felt herself sinking in a quicksand of desolation. They were ruined financially; that was what all this meant. And her mother was a slave. Their life had been stripped of all those niceties that had given it charm. There was nothing left but the stark, creaking machinery of merest existence.

She dropped into a chair by the table and tossed

off her hat, resting her chin in her cupped hands while her gloomy eyes took in further details. The floor had not been swept. The sink was piled high with unwashed dishes. They were the best dishes, with the gold band and the small pink roses. That crude little Daphy Giddings had been feasting from plates that had heretofore been too choice except for the most festive occasions. Heather's eyes brimmed with tears. The kitchen swam crazily before the gathering mists of pity and despair.

"Why, Heather, child! I didn't expect you till tomorrow."

Mrs. Davenway's surprise was freighted with affection. She had come through the back door with flurried weariness; but when she caught sight of Heather, she crossed the room with a rush of joy. She was built on more generous lines than her daughter, taller, broader, heavier of step. Her hair was darker, although threaded with silvery lights; her face testified to greater beauty, in spite of lines that had been etched by care. She was vigorously efficient whereas the girl was vital with youth; she was full of plans whereas the girl was full of dreams. They were like variations of the same theme, but the windows of their sensitiveness looked out in different directions.

"Oh, mother!"

With a cry that broke on a sob, the girl flew into her mother's outstretched arms. Burying her head on her mother's breast, she gave up to a storm of unrestrained weeping. For a long time they stood locked in each other's arms, in a communion too poignant for speech.

"Heather, dear, don't take it so hard."

"Oh, mother, what—what happened?"

Mrs. Davenway said nothing. Her arms tightened about the girl's shoulders; her lips worked as she looked down at the sleek head.

"Mother," sobbed Heather in a stifled voice, "why—why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't, somehow. I—I thought 'twould be easier if you were to come back and see for yourself. But way you're taking it, Heather—seems like it ain't."

CHAPTER II

IT was a different Heather who returned to the kitchen a few minutes later, shorn of her city smartness, toned to a world of toil by an old blue lawn gown and a capable linen apron. Mrs. Davenway eyed the latter disapprovingly.

"I don't want you to help, Heather. I'll plow through here in two shakes. You see if it ain't cool on the side porch—well, no, I guess Mr. Ransome is home right now. Suppose you try the back yard. You'll find the hammock——"

Heather took down a dish-towel from the patent bars near the stove. "Nonsense! It's no hotter for me than it is for you. We'll roast together." She reached for the teaspoons. "Mother—didn't you get the insurance?"

"Yes, I got it. Sure." Mrs. Davenway plumped a stack of dessert plates into the dishpan.

"The three thousand?"

"Yes, but——"

Heather's lips tightened. "Well, then——"

Mrs. Davenway hesitated. She emptied the dishpan, refilled it, lashed the water into a foam with the soap-shaker, and still could not find words. Heather set down a teacup and waited, watching her mother in growing apprehension.

"I want you should see it right, Heather. I don't

want you to blame your father, not for a minute. He meant well."

Heather's heart sank. "You mean—he left debts," she supplemented heavily.

"No—well, I didn't think of calling 'em debts. But you see he'd hoped to get ahead, and—and there were a good many obligations on 'ccount of investments he'd been trying. You see that's different, don't you?"

Heather loyally saw that it was different.

"And you'll remember that your father always meant well?"

The girl nodded slowly. "Yes, mother. Of course."

The older woman gave a sigh of relief. The memory of Josiah Davenway was safely shrouded by loving phrases.

Heather dried the plates in thoughtful silence. Mrs. Davenway, vigorously scrubbing the cookie pans, became calmly explanatory. "That piece of land by the river is in my name, and the home is clear, but as for money—there was just seventy-six dollars when I'd got those notes cleaned up. So I had to do something. I couldn't sit down and practically eat up the house, and I ain't ready to sell it—yet. I suppose you don't think this is a very stylish occupation, Heather, but I'm not trained for anything else, and in lots of ways this is real pleasant."

"Oh, but Mrs. Giddings!" burst out Heather rebelliously. "How did you ever come to take her—and Daphy? And that awful man on the porch?"

Mrs. Davenway laughed. "Lor', Heather dear, selecting boarders ain't any game of hot coffee. You can't go around to the houses and tag the folks you'd pick out for a social group. A small place like

Hampton ain't very rich in boarding material, and there ain't a day that I don't thank my stars for being so lucky."

Heather, blazing a trail through the stacks of dishes on the drain-board, discovered a gleam of hope. "Mrs. Giddings is temporary, isn't she? She never had money enough——"

"She's got plenty now," interrupted Mrs. Davenway, rubbing hot soapsuds into the corners of the iron sink. "Her mother's brother in Chicago left it to her. She's got it soft at last.

"And now," she added, more briskly, "if you'll help me 'bout two minutes more—move the furniture back into the dining-room! I've been having linoleum put down in there, 'cause I'm going to take some mealers, and——"

"Mealers!" cried Heather, aghast. She tipped gently over against the wall and looked at her mother with a stricken expression. Her hands dropped. "Mealers!" she repeated. "My soul, what next?"

Mrs. Davenway's fine eyes, for a moment soft with pity over the tragic discouragement before her, presently twinkled with amusement. "It's all 'cause you're tired, Heather," she said lightly. "The mealers ain't coming 'cept at night; don't seem like I could cook for any more in the middle of the day."

Heather hung up the towel and followed her mother silently into the sitting-room, now crowded with a double allotment of furniture.

"I'm not generally in such a mess at this time in the afternoon," pursued Mrs. Davenway, moving chairs to make a free space near the sideboard. "It's been

an unusually heavy day, what with the baking and meals and then the trouble at the Spinketts's."

"What's wrong at the Spinketts's?" inquired Heather with marked apathy.

"We'll shove the table back and leave it here for the present, Heather, so't we can put things on it. We can get the sideboard past now, and that has to go in first. Why, trouble is, the baby's sick, and I been called over every few minutes."

"Can't Mrs. Spinkett call on somebody else, mother? As busy as you are, it's asking a good deal——"

"Now, 'shaw!" interrupted Mrs. Davenway with a laugh. "I ain't ever too busy to be a neighbor. I'm bound to admit we'd all have had a freer day if Tillie Spinkett knew more 'bout feeding babies. Talk about divine will!" she puffed, shuffling backward to guide one end of the heavy sideboard. "Seems like the Lord gets blamed for a lot of folks' carelessness, from drownings to drainage, but He ain't going to get blamed for Eddie Spinkett's stomach-ache if I can help it. There, don't that sideboard look more elegant than ever, now't the room's all fresh?"

"Mis' Davenway!" screeched a thin, frightened voice from the yard. "Mis' Davenway! Qui-i-ick!"

Mrs. Davenway darted to the window and called back. "All right, Tillie. Coming! Now, Heather, don't you touch a thing. Eddie's worse and I got to go, but I'll have plenty of time. And if Mrs. Weatherwax calls up, tell her I'm keeping the strawberry festival in mind tomorrow night. I'll have the cakes there by four."

She was gone. Heather, ignoring her honorable dismissal, trudged back and forth with chairs and

dishes. The physical activity gave a certain relief from the unhappy thoughts that might easily have engulfed her.

She pushed the table toward the door, but found that she could not push it through. She lifted one side, lost her grasp, and jammed her hand as the table dropped back. Nursing her tingling fingers, she thoughtfully calculated the respective widths of the door and the table.

"Maybe I could pull it through," she thought. "But it's wedged so tight—I'll have to go around——"

It meant a detour through the house, and she was tired and suffocated now. In a sudden rebellion, she decided to conquer distance by a far more simple method. On the pivot of one hand, she vaulted into the air and landed in a small blue and white cheese on the top of the table.

At that instant the kitchen door opened to admit a heated, somewhat boyish face under a sunburned straw hat. The door swung a little wider and revealed a pair of gingham shoulders bent under a fat white sack.

"Oo-hoo! Where do you want this flour—Great heavens!"

Paralyzed by amazement, they stared at each other.

CHAPTER III

"CLIF STANLEIGH!" gasped the girl. "What are you doing here—with flour?"

"Delivering it. But it's the first time, and I don't know where to put it."

"Put it anywhere," she said limply. "It'll have to be emptied."

Shifting his burden, the better to hold it with one hand, he spread a newspaper on the drain-board and lowered the sack upon it. He flung the old straw hat on a chair. Then, dusting the flour from his hands, he came into the dining-room. Heather had scrambled from her perch. She tried to meet him with great dignity.

"And what were you doing—with that table?" he inquired in turn, with a quizzical smile.

"Moving it."

"Oh! Some Hallowe'en stunt? If you'll accept straight engineering, maybe I can help you."

"I don't see how it ever went into the sitting-room," she speculated. "It's too wide to come back."

"Your mother got it in there, didn't she?"

"Yes," she said, and flushed. In the midst of her growing distaste for her surroundings, it was annoying to be found inadequate. Clifton Stanleigh, however, seemed to be thinking only of the problem—not of comparisons. He pushed the table back, turned it over,

tilted it, dragged it through. He righted it again and slid it into the center of the room.

"Thank you, Clif."

He shrugged. "Easiest job today. I say, Heather, you don't know what a start you gave me when I opened the door and saw you sitting there in state. Took me back to our childhood. Do you remember how you used to harness the big rock in the orchard over at our place? You were driving it down between the apple trees—only you never actually got it under motion. You were too busy giving me orders about clearing the way——"

"Oh Clif, how foolish we were! But that was ages ago."

The boy Clif Stanleigh, full of pranks and good nature, had been a playmate of her childhood; but this tall man with the worried line between his eyes, carrying sacks of flour to people's back doors—this man was practically a stranger. Except for a year at Dartmouth, he had stayed in the old groove. Inevitably their ideas must be very different; and while she intended to be kind, she also intended to be cautious.

She glanced up to begin the business of being cautious, and encountered a light in the steady gray eyes that momentarily upset her purpose and scattered the words that had been on the tip of her tongue. To her relief, it proved a vagrant look, scurrying to cover behind a curtain of casual interest. She could have laughed at herself as having imagined it, and the reaction increased her composure.

"Ages ago," she repeated with a calm smile.

"Yes, as far as time is concerned," he admitted, "but you can't make me believe you've forgotten the

tricks of your play-days. To tell the truth, last two or three years when I've seen you, you've seemed kind of dignified, but today—that rig and the table and everything—you're the same little Heather."

She moved away slightly. "But I'm not the same. How could I be?"

"Easily enough—in the ways that count."

"In the ways that count? But those are just the ways in which I'm most different."

He stared at her with a puzzled expression. She noticed that his face was squarer than she had remembered, and that his lips were straighter and firmer.

"Don't look so serious," she laughed. "I'm only warning you not to judge me by a careless moment and expect I'm the same wild little tomboy you used to know. We'll have to get acquainted over again."

"I haven't changed," he said gravely. "That's really what you mean. I've stayed where I was, and you've gone on."

"I don't mean anything of the sort," she denied indignantly. "I wouldn't be so snippy. You've changed as much as I have; I can see it by looking at you. It's growing up that makes the difference. Everybody has to go ahead."

"Everybody has to go, you mean," he modified grimly. "Lord knows whether it's ahead or not."

"Oh Clif!" She turned toward him with a friendly solicitude that swept away her aloofness, swept away the years and took them back to the time when they had climbed trees and fished and run races together. "Oh Clif, I'm so sorry! Aren't—aren't things going well?"

"Oh, yes," he said mechanically. "Yes, everything's all right."

"And the store—are you still——"

His surprise merged into amusement as he looked down at his shabby working clothes, powdered with flour. "Don't look much like a proprietor, do I? Yes, I still own the store. Tom Davis is sick—touch of sunstroke yesterday. I had to take his place this afternoon."

"And your brothers are well?"

"Sure. Ward expects to have a try-out on one of his plays this fall. He's terribly excited. Mason has another year in college. He isn't coming home this summer; got a position. Why, I wrote you——"

"Yes, you did," she said hurriedly. Somehow she didn't care to linger on the thought of those letters, which Clif had written with faithful regularity and which she had answered with growing infrequency. "I only thought," she stammered, "that perhaps something had happened—you acted so——"

His lips tightened, but his tone was aggressively cheerful. "No, everything's jogging along. Only thing that threatens is that Mrs. Tripe's likely to set her three children on my trail if I don't deliver her soda and corn starch before half-past three. She's got a spontaneous nature—that woman."

He started for the kitchen. "It's good to see you back, Heather. I—we've missed you. Why, say, you're just in time for the big doings tomorrow night—supper and all-hands-around for the Cemetery Association. Wouldn't you enjoy meeting everybody again?"

"I—well, I——"

"Let me call for you. Gee, it would seem like old times. Remember the spreads we used to have on the seat of the lumber wagon—limited menu of milk and molasses cookies? I'll never forget the day you dropped the kitten into the pail, and we pulled him out and drank the milk anyhow."

She smiled as she met his eager expression. The worried line was gone from his forehead; he looked the carefree boy again.

"I remember the kitten," she acknowledged. "We kept the poor thing in the broiling sun till he was dry."

"Yes, and then his fur was all stuck together, and you brushed it out with the currycomb."

"I'm afraid I did. I had more zeal than mercy in those days. I was always doing something awful."

Clifton Stanleigh chuckled. "Not awful, but you certainly had a way of pulling off the unexpected. You took all the tricks when it came to beating monotony off the map. Well, I've got to get to work. Mrs. Tripe, I hear you calling me. What do you say about to morrow night, Heather? I look like a tramp right now, but——"

"Oh Clif, it isn't that, but——"

The gaiety died in his face. "But what?" he prompted, in the tone of one who fears what he is about to hear.

She traced an imaginary pattern on the table with a nervous finger. "I'm afraid I can't go, Clif. You see, I've just got home, and I'm—I'm tired, and——" She looked up miserably.

Clifton Stanleigh had not stirred, but a change had come over him that made Heather catch her breath. She had been afraid he might be hurt, but she knew

intuitively that he was not thinking of the present moment. He was looking at her intently, as if he saw through to the most secret motives that she guarded even from herself. She had said glibly enough that as grown individuals they were not acquainted, but she had not believed that it was true in any vital sense. Now she knew that it was, knew that she had touched a button that sent a current not merely over one short wire, but rushing through a whole tangle of wires that she had not dreamed existed. The color rose in her cheeks as she felt her subterfuges torn aside.

She took a quick step toward him. "Clif, I'm sorry. You know I don't mean——"

He roused. "I understand, Heather." His lips twisted in an odd smile; he spoke in a quiet, detached voice as if he were looking on at the scene instead of taking part in it. "I don't wonder you feel—just the way you do. Please tell your mother I'll send the eggs the minute I get them. Darius Boardman 'phoned he'd bring some in the morning."

She heard the screen door close with a light bang, and she was suddenly seized with a wholly unreasonable aversion for the days and weeks ahead of her. This was hardly the beginning, and——

"Good heavens," she thought unhappily, "how clumsy I am! Can't I be firm without walking over people's feelings?"

It was all the fault of the village, she told herself savagely as she set the chairs back in their places. If Clifton Stanleigh had come down to New York, they could have gone back to the comradeship of their childhood and nobody would have thought about it twice; but Hampton Valley had frankly expected them to do

that very thing and was only waiting to read significance into the most trivial circumstance. Hampton was full of watchful eyes and gifted tongues, and it had an undeniable genius for drawing conclusions from even the weakest premises. It was this ready faculty that introduced the poison of self-consciousness into a situation which would have been simple in a large community, where activities have a wider range.

To Heather, the long, shady dining-room grew more stifling every second. It smelled of linoleum, of fresh starch in the old lace curtains. The heat had that oppressive quality that crushes one as with a weight. She lifted another window toward the garden and pressed close against the screen to get a breath of growing things.

The apple trees in the side yard threw cool shadows on the unmown grass; the lilac brushed the window with slender, careless arms; the pansies by the walk were sending up their first blooms; and beyond them was a feathery mist of asparagus tops. Along the fence were rosebushes, cinnamon and damask, now a gorgeous burst of pink. The garden space for vegetables was twice as large as usual, Heather noticed, and yet there was not a weed to mar the straight ranks of lettuce and radishes and peas. How could her mother find time for all this work?

"Why did Clif have to come around the very first thing?" she fretted to herself. "Or why did he have to ask me to their silly old supper? He doesn't seem to have any idea what it does to you to live in the city for eight years. . . . My gracious, he treats me as if I belonged to Hampton Valley. After eight years!

. . . I wish his eyes didn't look like a dog's— Nonsense, dogs don't have gray eyes. But, somehow——"

She wondered uncomfortably what her mother would think if she knew of this interview. Clifton was a favorite with her; his mother had been her most intimate friend. The two families had always been closely companionable until death had broken the circle.

Heather had frankly preferred Clifton to all her other playmates. And then, while they were still children, the break had come. In a winter of unusual severity Heather had developed pneumonia; before she had fully recovered, she had had a second attack. It had left her so weakened that the family had become alarmed and had sent her to Mrs. Davenway's aunt in California. In the milder climate she had soon regained her health, but she had also become indispensable to the lonely woman whom she was visiting, so that the Davenways had been persuaded to allow Heather to remain and absorb advantages which were not possible in Hampton Valley.

She had stayed in the West for five years; but when she was half way through her college course, her aunt had died. Then Heather had so far compromised with the wishes of her family as to return to the East, but she had been away long enough to demand wider opportunities than Hampton Valley afforded. She had obtained a small editorial position in New York; and in the three years that she had held it, she had been promoted to an ample salary and had found herself among congenial friends and surroundings.

"Eight years!" she repeated, and now a smile of amusement chased away her vague dissatisfaction. "They've made some change in 'the same little

Heather,' thank heaven. I wonder if I can live here all summer without letting Hampton know how it looks—after eight years of real——"

With renewed serenity she flung away from the window and went back to the kitchen. She swept the floor, dusted, cleaned the stove. And still Mrs. Davenway did not return.

Heather looked at her watch. She had an hour before the supper preparations must be begun, but she didn't know what to do with it. She felt barred from the rest of the house. At any moment she might encounter a Boarder, reading one of her books or sitting in one of her favorite corners, and she could not yet trust herself to assume the right manner. She didn't even know what the right manner was.

A sound from the barn broke sharply through her thoughts—a scraping sound, the rasping of a bored hoof against the side of a stall.

"Old Spark!" she exclaimed delightedly. "Of course—this instant. No, I'll get my riding things."

She dashed upstairs; dashed down again a few minutes later in an old riding suit and a pair of shabby high shoes. She was carrying her saddle. Under a faded shade hat, her face was radiantly interested, for the first time since she had stepped into the unexpected complications of the afternoon.

Spark, a gentle creature the color of a baked apple, had ambled into an almost horseless period without the slightest misgiving about his desirability. He had long ago ceased to be of necessity to the Davenways; but having been a family pet since Heather's childhood, he was an unquestioned part of the household and was enjoying an honorable old age, untroubled by the

effort of earning his living. He greeted Heather with a low, joyful whinny and an arching of his graceful neck; then craftily wrinkled his soft nose against the girl's closed hand. She opened it slowly, tantalizing him, before she gave him the sugar which was part of the homage he invariably received.

"Good old boy!" she crooned. "We're going to take a nice walk together, aren't we? Just poke along under the trees, you spoiled rascal."

She untied him and backed him out of the stall; but before she could reach for her saddle, a shadow darkened the sunshine in the barn door. A bulky figure followed it. It was the man whom she had seen on the porch—Mr. Ransome, her mother had called him. Probably this shining red automobile under the haymow belonged to him.

The man lifted his hat. "You are Miss Davenway," he said, more in statement than in question.

Heather nodded.

"I knew you were expected," he continued in a casual tone. There was nothing discourteous in his manner or speech, but Heather felt instinctively that she would have reason to dislike this man if she knew him better. His black eyebrows, in sharp contrast with his graying hair, gave him a sinister expression that she knew was wholly a trick of coloring, yet she chose to think that it might be one of Nature's ways of betraying a man who ought not to be trusted. She resented the knowing look in his roving dark eyes. She was offended by his dress, although if a man wishes to wear a brown suit on a hot day and to supplement it with a pink-and-white hairline shirt and a tan necktie with purple rings scattered over it, he has not really broken any ethical

law and is rather more entitled to sympathy than to suspicion.

But when, instead of going toward the car, he turned the other way and took down the harness from its hook on the wall, Heather's cool reserve was routed by sheer amazement.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Hitch up," he replied laconically. He came toward her with the harness in his hands.

"Hitch up!" A flush of anger rose in her cheeks. "What are you going to hitch up?"

"This horse." He smiled lazily.

"This horse!" exclaimed Heather, in a voice that was at the same time suppressed and explosive. "*This* horse!" she repeated incredulously, although poor old Spark was the only living specimen of his race within range.

He laughed. "Sure. Sorry if it interferes——"

"It would interfere," she corrected. "Isn't that your car?" She indicated the red automobile with a scornful twirk of her thumb. She wanted to characterize it with a disdainful adjective, but she could see at a glance that it would not be justified. The machine was new to her, but obviously efficient and well made.

"'S mine," he acknowledged calmly. "But I can't drive it on a bum back road, so——"

A flash of rage blurred Heather's reason for a moment. Perhaps it was the implication that her beloved Spark was adapted to bum back roads. . . . She had intended to use the saddle, but she had often ridden Spark bareback in her childhood. Her indignation against this man who had not only invaded her

home but now proposed to appropriate her horse, plunged her into instant reversion.

Slipping her hand to the end of the halter, she rested one foot on the feed-box and sprang to Spark's back. She gave the horse's neck a gentle slap with her palm and settled herself against the triumphal dash for which this had always been the signal.

"Sorry if it interferes." She repeated Mr. Ransome's words with a low laugh of victory. "You see, I have to take——"

She stopped in stupefaction. Spark's response to the signal had been scarcely more than an upward jerk and a shuffling of hoofs that accomplished no progress whatever. A firm hand had grasped his halter. Heather felt suddenly helpless as her gaze fell on the thick fingers tensed around the rope; more helpless yet as she looked down into Booth Ransome's face, on which the lazy smile still lingered.

CHAPTER IV

"YOU are very impulsive, Miss Davenway," commented Booth Ransome, as he dropped the harness and secured Spark's halter through the ring by the barn door, Spark's usual fate when he was being curried.

Heather was thinking exactly the same thing about herself. She certainly had been impulsive, and she regretted it now that it was too late. With her mount hitched to a ring in the wall, she felt as foolish as if she had been caught on a hobby-horse. She heartily wished she was back in the house, but she could think of no dignified way of getting there.

"Please come down," he continued lightly, and he offered his hand to help her.

Heather, flushed and chagrined, looked at him defiantly. She did not move. To descend, was to acknowledge defeat; to sit there, was to be ridiculous; but she could think of no possible third course. Tardily she realized the huge mistake of openly opposing a man of domineering type; but if she were to make apologetic surrender, she knew it would not save her from humiliating moments. The black eyes and mocking lips promised her full retaliation.

"*Come* down," he said with significantly altered phrase, and this time he grasped her hand and gave her a slight jerk.

She pulled away, furious. "Stop!" she cried. "Stand back. I'll do my own coming down."

He released her instantly and stepped back. Heather, her decision made for her by his persistence, looked around, wishing she could slip to the floor between Spark and the red car. But there was not room. So she swung over the other way and started to slide—when she felt herself caught, lifted lightly, and set down at the end of the feed-box.

Her dark eyes blazed as she faced the man. She was amazed and infuriated. But he was looking at her with the indulgent amusement which one lavishes on an exuberant kitten or a frolicsome squirrel. Before it, her anger remained inarticulate. She could not complain of indignity; she had been treated as impersonally as if she had been a vase of flowers—or rather, she had been treated as if she were three instead of twenty-three. And to protest against being considered a child, is to sound like one.

"Better keep away from Spark's feet," he cautioned. "Space is kinda cramped here."

"Spark wouldn't stir," she returned coldly.

"Might, though. Shied at a stump th'other day."

She caught at the implication. "Are you in the habit of driving him?"

"Well, 'tain't a habit yet, but I hire him occasionally, same's this afternoon."

"Oh, do you mean——" Her rage was quenched in dismay. "Do you mean you had arranged with mother——"

"Well, naturally. What did you s'pose—that I was stealing your darned old nag?" Suddenly his expression became apprehensive, as if he realized that he had

really angered her. "I guess I was kinda rough," he said, with astonishing humility, "but I didn't mean it that way. Manners ain't much in my line. I—I hope you won't lay it up against me."

The apology seemed to her unaccountable, but his effort at conciliation was patently sincere. It was possible, she thought, that his rudeness was the result of ignorance, not of intention. So she met his apology with an explanation of her own arbitrary conduct.

"Spark is my horse, Mr. Ransome. Of course I agree to any arrangement that mother has made—but I didn't understand."

With all the dignity left to a defeated person in a shabby riding suit and the wrong shoes, Heather walked out of the barn. How could she have known that everything about the place was being rented?

"I wonder if the hammock is bringing in an income?" she pondered ruefully. "And I suppose it won't be ethical to touch the croquet set till I find out——"

Mrs. Davenway was in the pantry, flouring the molding-board. She looked up with a loving smile as Heather burst into the kitchen.

"Is it good to be home again, dear?"

Heather stopped abruptly. "Why, I—oh, yes, part of it is, of course, but——"

Mrs. Davenway emptied the pan of raised-biscuit dough on the board and gave her daughter a sidewise glance, half amused, half wistful. "I must say, Heather, that for a person chock-full of happiness, you've got awful good self-control 'bout showing it. Did you find something that didn't suit you?"

"Yes, I did. I should say I did."

"What was it?"

"It was that Mr. Ransome. Mother, I hate that man." She clenched her fists in renewed indignation.

Mrs. Davenway, sifting flour over the dough, paused in the most profound astonishment. "Dearest, you mustn't feel so——"

"I know what you're going to say," interrupted the girl fiercely. "You're going to say I mustn't feel so wicked. Well, how can I help it? I didn't come home intending to feel wicked. But when that man——" Her tone invested the phrase with searing scorn—"when that man—that crude, bold, unmannerly interloper—came out there and took Spark, my very own horse that father gave me on my tenth birthday——"

"Oh!" Mrs. Davenway drew a long breath, as if she had feared a more complicated difficulty. "That was all my fault, dearest. I ought to have told you about Spark, but with the dining-room tore to pieces and Eddie Spinkett acting up all day and last night, too, I forgot. But what Mr. Ransome did was all right 'cause I—I don't understand how 'tis, Heather. Seems like you didn't tackle the man right."

"I didn't tackle him at all," put in the girl. "He tackled me. I didn't say a word until——"

"You know what I mean, dear. You must have got excited and kinda r'iled him, 'cause really he's a nice man. He's been here 'most two months, and I wouldn't ask for anybody pleasanter 'round the house."

"Where does he come from?" Heather began on a logical analysis of Mr. Ransome's claim to integrity.

"Bellows Falls."

"And what's his business?"

"I guess he's been in a good many things, way he talks. But seems he's trying himself out now, to see

if he can sell automobiles. You saw his car in the barn, the Comet. It's dressy-looking, I think, and he's sold a few already 'round here."

"And do you understand, mother, that his trip this afternoon is to sell a car to some man who lives on a road so awful that only a horse can get over it?"

Mrs. Davenway's busy hands paused a moment in a white billow of dough, and a frown of perplexity twisted her brows, to be chased away almost immediately by amusement. She laughed. "Bless your heart, child, I never thought a thing about it. He may have relatives in these parts, or a dozen side lines, all perfectly legitimate. All I know is that he's trying to make sales of the Comet car and that he's a fine boarder. That's enough for me, ain't it?"

"Does he pay you well, and promptly?" continued Heather mercilessly.

"He pays all I asked him, and it's a good price—yes."

"And promptly?" persisted Heather.

"Ye-es—that is, this is the first time that he's been behind, and he explained——"

"How much is he behind, mother?"

"Two weeks," admitted Mrs. Davenway reluctantly; "but if you'd known him as long as I have, you'd know it would be all right. I'm not a bit worried, not a bit. I know he'll pay me."

Suddenly the lingering embers of Heather's vexation were extinguished by a great tide of pity—tenderest pity for this weary, patient woman who believed whatever one chose to tell her, whose very sweetness put her at the mercy of selfish, designing natures. Momentarily Heather looked at her not with the eyes of

a daughter, but with the eyes of a mother who sees a loved child led by naïve trustfulness into treading dangerous paths. It was a flash of vision that drew her nearer to her mother and at the same time set them further apart through involuntary comparison.

Except for these years away from Hampton Valley, Heather thought, she would have grown up with a similar simplicity of outlook, even though with less serenity. Broader opportunities, travel, contact with many people—these were the agencies that had made her different. They had given her a better perspective; a wider knowledge of human nature; consequently, a cooler estimate of new situations. She had come home to help, and here was more immediate need than she had anticipated.

Impulsively she ran to her mother, caught her around the waist, gave her a kiss. Mrs. Davenway's tired face became so irradiated with joy that the girl felt a pang of remorse for having given way to criticism, however justified. She might have waited a few hours, at least.

"You're a dear," she said affectionately, "and I love you for being so easy with everybody, but you surely need me around to look out for you. This believing in everybody has a charming sound, but it doesn't work out. You've got to size people up and treat them accordingly, and you—oh, I'm not sure that you could be firm and independent if you tried."

Mrs. Davenway smiled as she fitted biscuits deftly into a pan. "Nonsense. I can be firm—firm as a rock."

"I don't believe it. You let everybody have his own way. Here you've been telling me how nice Mr. Ran-

some is, and all it means is that he's complacent with you because you let him have everything just as he wants it, and——"

"But I don't," interrupted Mrs. Davenway unexpectedly.

"You don't! About how many times have you opposed him?"

"About twelve, I should say. You see, he wants to buy that piece of land by the river, and I won't sell it."

"What does he want it for? To start up a mill again?"

"No. The poor old mill that's there now isn't good for anything but to make a picture on a post card, and nobody would build another in Hampton, with the fine mill they've got in Loopville. No, he don't say exactly what he wants it for, but I've got a notion it's for some kind of building scheme. He offers me fifteen hundred dollars, but I won't take it." She picked up the pans and started for the kitchen.

Heather trailed after her. "I'm glad you won't," she declared heartily. "That land ought to be valuable some day, with all those fine trees."

"That's the way I figure," agreed Mrs. Davenway, as she slid the biscuit pans on top of the warming-oven. "I figure that in twenty years I can sell those trees for timber, and I may as well hold them till they're worth more. Every few days he asks me again, but——"

"But you won't let him cajole you into selling, will you?"

"I surely won't. I've set my mind on keeping that land. I can be firm enough, Heather, when it comes to matters that I think are important."

Heather was moved to tardy retraction. "Of course I knew you could. I said more than I meant, I suppose, just because I felt irritable. You can't imagine what a shock it is to find you working so hard; and then when you defended a disagreeable person, it seemed as if——"

"I hope," said a voice from the dining-room door, "I sincerely hope you are not conversing about me."

"We surely weren't, Mrs. Giddings." Mrs. Davenway, stepping into the pantry for the box of macaroni, flung the reassurance over her shoulder. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is. Good afternoon, Heather. Daphy said you'd come; said you'd stepped off'n your cloud, same as usual." Mrs. Giddings laughed at her own pleasantry, a way she had of apprising a listener of the part he was expected to play. Heather smiled. She never had taken Daphy's mother very seriously, so it was easy to be amiable.

Mrs. Giddings advanced into the room, holding up a small paper bag with an exquisite curl of her fingers. She carried rather more ballast than had been foreseen when her height had been decided upon; her dark hair showed startling streaks of white which made it look like some of the ermine that rabbits contribute to the fur trade.

She had on a thin white gown lavishly festooned with black ribbons. In a magazine expensive enough to be respected, Mrs. Giddings had read that a knot of black would give a French touch; and she had reasoned, with what power had been vouchsafed her, that if a knot would suggest Paris, a bolt or two would give her the backing of the whole French Republic. There-

fore streamers had been affixed to her belt, and streamers depended from her elbows, so that she moved in the midst of a steady fluttering like that of pennants in the breeze.

"Mr. Brisbee, my attorney-at-law from Loopville, was just passing through Hampton Valley," she explained, "and he brought me an offering." She held the bag slightly higher, that all might see.

"Wasn't that nice of him!" commented Mrs. Davenway genially, as she broke the crisp macaroni into a saucepan.

"Yes, it was." Mrs. Giddings's lips drew into a genteel pucker. "It's cherries. His brother in California sent him a box by prepaid express, and he remembered me with a souvenir of 'em."

"That's grand," subscribed Mrs. Davenway. "You just set 'em down, Mrs. Giddings, and I'll see that they're on the supper table."

Mrs. Giddings put down the bag. Turning, she surveyed Heather slowly, lingering a perceptible moment on each detail of old shoes, shabby suit, and battered shade hat. "I hope I see you well," she offered politely.

"Yes, and several other things," smiled Heather. "You see me well and very hot and considerably surprised."

"Hot!" Mrs. Giddings picked this word out of Heather's remark and treated it to a fastidious gesture of distaste. "I should say! It must be very trying to swelter in artificial stove heat on a day in June." At the door she whirled, in a dance of agitated ribbons. "There are forty-eight cherries, Mrs. Davenway."

She steered skillfully through the door and closed it with a moderate bang.

"My gracious!" began Heather. "Oh, well, I suppose there's no need to take a sledge-hammer to shoo away a mosquito. A wave of the hand might answer."

Mrs. Davenway was pouring hot water from the teakettle into the saucepan. She laughed as she put on the lid with a pleasant clatter. "Heather, I've let you stay in this hot kitchen 'cause I wanted a little visit with you first thing, but you mustn't do it any more. You've got to go 'round and see your friends and have a good time, and forget what I'm doing as much as possible, 'cause this is your vacation—and two weeks ain't very long."

Heather smiled grimly. "This isn't a two-weeks' vacation, mother."

"Isn't?" Mrs. Davenway grew rigid with astonishment and apprehension. "Do you mean you've given up your position?"

"I mean I've taken a leave of absence till the middle of October," explained Heather in a voice that had gone lifeless. "I thought we'd have a summer together—just you and I—alone." She turned swiftly away, struggling for self-control.

"Oh, my dear!" Mrs. Davenway's words were heavy with distress. "I wish I'd known—but I didn't s'pose you'd ever be contented——"

"I understand, mother; you thought I'd deserted. But I couldn't let you know my plan, because I wasn't sure till the last minute that I could carry it out. It all depended on my finding a substitute. Well, anyhow," she continued more resolutely, "I came home to help, and I propose to do it, even if it means joining

the waiters' union. I'll run up and get off this suit—and don't look so tragic, mother. Probably this is funny if we could get the proper slant on it. I'll be right down to help with the rations. How many will there be to mess?"

But her assumption of gaiety failed to lift the worried solicitude that had settled on her mother's face.

"There are three regulars," Mrs. Davenway admitted miserably, "and three mealers to begin with."

"To begin with!" echoed Heather, with a shaky laugh. "To *begin* with. Oh Lord!"

CHAPTER V

SUPPER at Mrs. Davenway's was a six-o'clock affair, but the members of her temporary family began to assemble much earlier. About five thirty Mrs. Giddings and her daughter appeared on the wide porch and draped themselves in fascinating attitudes in the most comfortable chairs, partly to enjoy and partly to be enjoyed. It was cool and pleasant at that time; presumably it contributed thrills to home-bound citizens to review thus picturesquely the fact that Mrs. Romilda Tuft Giddings and Miss Daphne Isabel Giddings were forever graduated from the world of sordid exertion and were now strolling in the field of luxury, served but no longer serving. Moreover, it was an hour when only house guests in full standing—three meals a day and lodging—were likely to avail themselves of porch privileges, and it behooved these financial superiors to entrench their position above those townspeople who were about to snatch at leisure through only one "boughten" meal a day.

Tonight Mrs. Giddings surveyed her daughter critically. "Daphy," she said sharply, "didn't I tell you never to wear that dress at night—never?"

"Yeh, guess you did so," admitted Daphy phlegmatically.

"Lilac!" exploded Mrs. Giddings, with a scornful

wave of her jeweled hand toward the offending gown, a muslin of solid color. "You'd be a fright in a red car. Wouldn't you have paradoxes of shame if Mr. Ransome asked you to ride after supper?"

"Oh, him!" Daphne raised her pretty shoulders disdainfully. "I'll bet he's somebody's grandfather. I say: if you're going to catch 'em, catch 'em young."

"Daphne Isabel! Don't let me hear you use such phraserology—and 'specially 'bout an elegant gentleman with a bountiful income. A person ud think you'd have more regard for your poor old mother, who's devoting her all to your present and your future."

"Aw, cut it out, ma," Daphne advised languidly.

It was true, as she had delicately hinted, that Mrs. Giddings was now devoting her energies to the exploitation of her attractive daughter, hoping by allure and quick moves to cause a stampede in the Valley. Since the eligible youth might be computed without mathematical strain, she had opened the lists to men of any age so long as they bore modest gifts in their hands. The numbers even then were against any such crowded action as a stampede; and whatever stir had so far been noticeable, had been in the receding direction. Mrs. Giddings, with every intention of saying, "Young man, draw nigh," became so zealous about it that she was understood to mean, "Surrender or fly."

Fortunately, her mother's methods and the village response were ordinarily of utter indifference to Daphy, her vision being wholly centered upon Sid Morrow, who dispensed ice cream and tooth paste in Jeff Cooper's drug store, but who had never entered the outermost fringes of Mrs. Giddings's ambitious hopes. Daphy summed up the situation in a burst of

confidence to Mattie Lyman, her dearest friend: "I'm letting the old dame amuse herself; but when it comes to putting a steady partner into office, it'll be little Daphy that'll do the electing, believe me."

At five forty-five Mrs. Araminta Pickering came out of her bleak, rambling house on the other side of Checker Street, locked the back door, hung the key on a nail at the right of the jamb, and pranced across to Mrs. Davenway's. She was a tall, gaunt woman of middle age—a woman with long, bumpy bones and too little flesh to hide them. Her small head was set on wide, emaciated shoulders that were carried too far forward; her thin ankles were grotesquely in contrast with her long, thoroughly sensible shoes. Under her sallow skin were two spots of color over her high cheek-bones, touches undoubtedly of physiological origin and yet oddly dissociated from either health or beauty. Mrs. Pickering always looked as if she were in extreme bodily depletion, and at the same time she was full of energy, indefatigable in the dissemination of news. In her own line, she was one of the busiest women in Hampton Valley, and she galloped all over town in a way that suggested a half-grown colt that circles round and round his pasture with the most tireless strength of his stiff, slanted legs.

"Hello, Romie," she greeted Mrs. Giddings before she reached the porch.

"Hello, Minty," responded Mrs. Giddings, in a tone slightly neutral. There had been years during her history as a housekeeper, harassed by poverty and overwork, when she and Mrs. Pickering had been chums without question, but the friendship was now complicated by growing inequalities. At this very

minute Mrs. Pickering was known to be renting her house and to be living in two back rooms therein, and she was under suspicion of preparing her tea and toast twice a day on a portable kerosene stove, whereas Mrs. Giddings—well!

"Ain't you pretty early for supper, Minty?" insinuated Mrs. Giddings with dignity.

"I come early on purpose," returned Mrs. Pickering, settling herself on the top step. "I heard somep'n 's afternoon that I reckoned would int'rust you. If——" She lifted her eyebrows and jerked her head a fraction of an inch in the general direction of the meditative Daphy.

Mrs. Giddings forsook the languor of the fine lady and sat up with ponderous alertness. "Daphy," she said ingeniously, "won't you go upstairs to my room and see if—if you can find my glasses and—and my crocheting?"

Daphy rose slowly and started obediently through the screen door. But she delayed closing it long enough to favor the two ladies with a Mona Lisa smile and a disdainful tilting of her pretty chin. Whatever Mrs. Pickering had to communicate tonight, Mattie Lyman would be primed with tomorrow, and a wait of sixteen hours made little difference to Daphy. The artlessness of middle-aged ladies was a source of secret incomprehension to her, but it was no part of her plan to disturb it.

Minty need not have urged this particular message as the reason for her coming early. She was usually the first to arrive, no matter what the occasion, and she could be depended upon not to leave so long as affairs were maintained at an interesting pitch. Any

hostess who lost Minty before the end of the function, knew therefrom that her function had been lacking in developments. Mrs. Pickering was a sort of clearing-house for the happenings of Hampton Valley and was so conscientious about gathering in items and sending them out promptly that any event which had not received the rubber stamp of her attention might at once be considered negligible. Furthermore, by correspondence with friends in Kenner Falls and Loopville and Frear's Crossing, she conducted a rather brisk mail order business in current events that took the cream off the length and breadth of Spinooski County.

Heather, placing a chocolate cake at each end of the long table in the dining-room, caught a glimpse of the congenial chat on the porch.

"We're collecting the mealers," she reported to her mother with an amused smile, when she went back to the kitchen.

"That's good." Mrs. Davenway closed the oven door and swung herself erect with the slight stiffness of tired muscles. "Wylie said he might be a bit late, so we won't wait for him. The minute you see Lote Joselyn coming in the gate, you ring the bell, won't you, dear?"

"Mm-hmm," agreed Heather without enthusiasm, as she unscrewed the cover from a jar of plum preserves. "But you haven't told me what's happened to Wylie's mother and Mr. Joselyn's sister?"

"Visiting," replied Mrs. Davenway, breaking apart the hot biscuits and replacing them in form on large plates. "Wylie's mother has gone to Lake George for a few weeks, and Lote's sister is visiting Zara Joselyn's

folks in Boston. Lote's terrible proud of the stylish time she's having. It's vacation, you know."

Heather apportioned plum preserves in eight glass sauce dishes. "I'll make a bargain with you, mother. I'll do all the waiting on the table if you—if you won't expect me to talk to—those folks."

Mrs. Davenway was running water at the sink, preparatory to filling the glass pitcher. She threw her daughter a glance half sympathetic, half pleading. "It'll be all right if you're quiet, Heather. There's Lote now. And we're all ready."

Heather took up the silver bell from the sideboard, but delayed ringing it till Mr. Joselyn reached the porch. He was a stout gentleman with a dapper manner. His heavy face was flabby and grooved with deep lines, but his spirit was perennial youth itself. He accomplished the attitude of a young gallant not by a poised conquering of age, but by flaying age in violent repudiation, by denying, by defying. The whole year through, he wore some piece of vegetation in his buttonhole; even during the long months of winter Mr. Joselyn flaunted a leaf of sweet-scented geranium, often the only bit of chlorophyll to be seen on the streets of Hampton. Incidentally Hampton could not help knowing why Mrs. Miller, Zelotes's sister, had six pots of fragrant geranium when other women were content with one. But it was summer now. Mr. Joselyn was wearing pansies, two of them, the cheerful hue of June butter.

With a rustle and buzz, the porch company filed into the dining-room. Chairs were scraped over the new linoleum and thumped back into position around the board. Greetings were exchanged with automatic

effusiveness while appraising eyes darted rapidly up and down the table, on which plates of food crowded one another in old-fashioned prodigality. In Hampton Valley one saw the menu instead of reading or hearing it, and a boarder's first privilege was to make pleasing calculations based upon his taste and capacity.

Heather brought in the big round dish of macaroni and cheese; her mother carried a plate of raised biscuits and a pot of tea. Dishes began to travel around the table, with a brief pause at each place—a routine as swift and methodical as the overhead carrier system in a factory or large post office. To one without an aversion to boarders, it would have appealed as a pleasant scene. The room was gratefully cool; occasionally a breath from the garden parted the freshly starched curtains and wafted in the faint sweetness of cinnamon roses. The light tinkle of silver on china was like a charming overtone in the midst of verbal interchange.

Mrs. Giddings glorified the business of mere eating by an arch sally to Mr. Joselyn.

"And how many hearts has our lady-killer broken today?" she inquired gracefully.

Mr. Joselyn, hugely gratified at this tribute, helped himself hurriedly to biscuits and made way for the platter of cold meat that was speeding up on its journey toward him.

"Aw, now, now!" he reproved, his small black eyes shining with delight. "Ain't you 'fraid you'll embarrass a young feller like me?"

"You'd oughter be embarrassed," playfully countered Mrs. Giddings, adding two sour pickles to the

growing collection of viands on her plate. "Hadn't he, Minty?"

"Guess he'd be int'rusted to know what I hear 'bout him," gayly subscribed Mrs. Pickering, in a voice modified by macaroni.

"Help!" called Mr. Joselyn from the heights of flattered vanity. "Hain't a man got any ree-dress?"

And all this because Mr. Zelotes Joselyn was a bachelor, by virtue of great firmness of character. For thirty years he had withstood the double attack of matronly persuasion and spinsterial wiles, and had come out of it with a lofty sense of triumph. There were women whom he greeted on the street with a sly expression which meant, "Ah, ha, I fooled you, didn't I?" And in their hearts they granted him the victory, but always with a fierce resentment against his independence.

New England talks about its old maids, but reserves its real displeasure for its bachelors. An unmarried man with an average disposition and a ten-room house is an affront to society; even a disposition may be condoned if there is no mortgage on the house. Hampton Valley frowned upon a man who failed to give some woman a home, urging vaguely that he would be very much better off.

Wylie Chamberlain came in. He was a tall young man, lean as a poplar tree. He had cool gray eyes and a grave manner. Until recently the Hampton Valley Itemizer had referred to him as "our rising young lawyer," but had now substituted the term "attorney with offices in the Gorham Block," as indicating that he had passed beyond the rising stage

and attained a somewhat stationary position of honor in the legal profession.

He greeted everybody pleasantly; then went around the table to shake hands with Heather. Mrs. Giddings followed this action with amazed eyes, and was so far overborne by astonishment as to nudge the apathetic Daphy with an arresting elbow. Mrs. Pickering went further.

"Well, I declare, Wylie! I'd clean forgot you and Heather was close friends."

He gave her a calm smile as he shook out his napkin. "Had you?" he said serenely. "Not like you, Mrs. Pickering, to forget anything."

Heather threw him a quick glance. Here was a voice out of the world she had left behind; it was like hearing a familiar language in a babel of strange tongues.

Mrs. Pickering, however, had a very different reaction. "You always was a sassy young'un when you was little," she snapped, "and looks like goin' 'fore the bar hain't helped you to outgrow it none, neither." She rapped out this obituary with a vicious jabbing of her fork into the sour pickle to which she had just helped herself. It was more than the slippery thing could stand; it shot off the plate and landed under the eaves of a chocolate cake. Fellow-boarders flew to the rescue, with a flurry which automatically changed the tenor of the conversation.

Mrs. Giddings's eyes rested upon Mr. Ransome's empty chair. "I hope—nothing has happened—to our esteemed gentleman friend," she ventured, with a wide solicitude that spoke for the whole table.

"He'll be along before dark," declared Mrs. Davenway placidly.

"He's been away three hours," said Heather, speaking for the first time and under the urge of a distressing thought—that Mr. Ransome had taken Spark and that he had indeed been gone an unaccountable length of time.

Mrs. Giddings turned toward her, arresting her fork in mid-air. "Well, I wouldn't have believed it!" she puffed dramatically. "Here I didn't s'pose you'd even met him, and you've got to the point of knowing to the minute when he leaves the residence. I never—truly I never!"

Heather stared, too amazed by this onslaught to switch her thoughts at once from her anxiety about Spark. Such crudeness! How did one meet it without giving offence? She caught Wylie Chamberlain's swift look, at once understanding and amused. It steadied her into coolness again.

"Mr. Ransome took my horse, Mrs. Giddings," she explained.

Too late she saw that she had only made it worse. Mrs. Giddings gave a fastidious shudder, like a sturdy launch bedecked with streamers, threw out her hands in her favorite gesture of sharing her findings with her audience, and entered upon the joy of expressing herself.

CHAPTER VI

I GUESS city life learns you to go pretty rapid," Mrs. Giddings began majestically. "Think of forming an acquaintance with an unknown man in no time, to the extent of lending him your pet animals! You certainly are not retarded, Heather. But then, I've always heard that city life took the retired modesty outa young folks and that you had to seek sylvan retreats to find noble womanhood unfolding per its own schedule. Oh, the sadness of it! All is, I hope you won't vitiate my Daphne into an intrepid vampire."

Suddenly Heather's resentment vanished; her lips danced. "I shall be very careful of Daphy, Mrs. Giddings," she said demurely.

Daphy, setting down her teacup, rolled her blue eyes toward Heather and gave her a slow smile. For the first time in their lives, the two girls amiably understood each other.

"I reckon you can trust her, ma," reassured Daphy languidly. "And if you can't, you can trust me, you know."

"I know I can, sweetheart," gurgled her mother. Then she turned her batteries again on Heather. "You understand, 'tisn't just one man I'm referring to. It is known to me that you've had a conference with Clif Stanleigh already. Seems like you don't lose much time getting things under motion, do you?"

Heather looked across at her rather helplessly. She knew that she must not say any of the hot things that rushed into her mind. But Mrs. Giddings did not wait for any rejoinder; she took the girl's expression as an encore and launched into a further effort.

"I did not expect to betray my feelings this way, but surprise has led me to speak extemporaneously. I am not used to guile; I am obsoletely shocked by it. Everybody who knows she that was Romilda Tuft, knows that I have lived a shaded, sequestered life, surrounded chiefly by the refining influence of the late Mr. Giddings, who was a man of great personnel. Consequently——" With a befitting sigh, Mrs. Giddings heroically turned from burrowing into her own past and brought her narrative up to date.

"'Twas Althy Mink told me about you, Heather, as I adjourned from down town this afternoon. I stopped to inform her that I'd seen her son Percy puffing a vile weed twice today. He's getting to be an invertebrate smoker, and who should know it but his mother? Well, then Althy just happened to mention that she saw Clif come in here with a sack of flour, and it was thirteen minutes 'fore he come out again."

Mrs. Giddings at this point enlivened her story with an arch smile, swinging it gracefully around the table as a switchman swings his lantern. "Not that Althy Mink was timing you, Heather! But she couldn't help noticing 'cause she had her watch on. She didn't even know you were home. She'd been cleaning the back chamber today, and it extirpated her from things, kinda. But I told her you'd come, 'cause my Daphne had just told me, and so we put two and two together."

"Four is your favorite number, isn't it?" inquired Wylie Chamberlain conversationally.

Mrs. Giddings glared at him. She felt the implied criticism, but lacked the mental dexterity to exonerate herself satisfactorily. After a moment she veered into a safe generality.

"I'd be blind if I didn't notice a few things under my very nose, Wylie Chamberlain."

"Well, so would Heather," he rejoined calmly. "I don't see how you could expect her to overlook whatever men choose to come into her own house. And speaking of Clif Stanleigh—I suppose you've all heard about his brother Ward."

Heather drew a breath of relief and started a chocolate cake on its rounds. She had been absurdly embarrassed, particularly when she had known that these personal jibes were considered in good taste by certain social circles in Hampton Valley; but she had not foreseen that those circles would invade her home life, and in the first impact of her surprise and dismay she was shocked out of her usual defences. She should have maintained an attitude of smiling self-possession, impervious to all shafts. That would have taken the point out of the whole attack. Tomorrow! Perhaps she could smile tomorrow. Surely in a few hours she would have herself better in hand.

Vaguely she realized that Wylie Chamberlain's presence had contributed to her mortification. She had seen him rarely since their childhood; he had been away from Hampton as much as she had; he had received far more training. His detached comprehension of her viewpoint and his effort to defend her reserve, helped to emphasize the vulgarity into which she and

her mother had fallen. But at the same time she was grateful.

"What's happened to Ward?" piped up Minty Pickering, severing a generous mouthful of chocolate cake.

"Why, he's been having some good luck at last."

"Luck! D'you mean he's sold a play?"

"No, but he's going to get a try-out. Some manager is very much interested. Ward hopes the play will be put on in the fall."

"Oh, hopes!" scorned the practical Mrs. Pickering. "Now you've put your finger on it. Hopes! That whole Stanleigh family has always lived on hopes—and not much else. Looks to me like we'd heard this try-out story a good many times. What I say is, if Ward Stanleigh could write a decent play, he'd ha' sold one 'fore this. Ain't that so, huh?"

Lote Joselyn munched corroboration. "Reckon 'tis. Must be nine year since Ward went down to New York, and——"

Mrs. Pickering took a recess from cake long enough to rap the years into the tablecloth with the tips of her bony fingers. "Nine!" she exploded. "It'll be eleven come September. He went five weeks after the fire in the Silsby Block that burned out Clara Stanleigh's cousin."

"Clifton seems a worthy young man," patronized Mrs. Giddings. "It's too bad his brother's got this untrammeled notion in his head."

"That's just what I've always said, Romie," confirmed her friend. "Why, I could ha' told him he'd never amount to shucks. Mebbe you don't know I spanked him once. Yes, I did that very thing. He'd got another one of his wild notions—that he could

run acrost my yard and wear the grass down to the roots. He'd lead the way, and a whole passel of boys ud follow him.

"Speakin' to him didn't do a mite of good, and finally I got mad——" Mrs. Pickering implied that this climax in her emotions never occurred except after long provocation; "yes, sir, I got mad and I showed him how smart he was. I stretched a wire above the grass an inch or so—a little teeny wire—and then I watched. Well, you better b'lieve that wire was too much for Ward. It ketched him—and then I ketched him, and I'd like you to know that I spanked him good and proper."

"What's that got to do with plays?" laughed Mrs. Davenway.

"Nothin' with plays, but it's got a lot to do with Ward and my faith in him. I tell you, after you've laid a young'un acrost your knees, you hain't got any faith left that he'll ever be a great man."

"Good heavens!" cried Wylie Chamberlain. "Is it only the unspanked that can rise in the world? To think that a careless childhood may upset the career of a genius!"

"Don't you think you're smart!" commented Mrs. Pickering resentfully. "I ain't a mite sure, Wylie, that I'm goin' to enjoy your bein' a mealer."

"Don't say it," he begged smilingly. "When I enjoy your society thoroughly, Mrs. Pickering, it would be a blow to know that it wasn't mutual. I assure you, there's nothing in Blackstone that's so illuminating about human nature as your observations."

"Well," bridled Mrs. Pickering, gratified at this ambiguity, "we'll let it pass, then. Only you do say

unexpected things. And I guess you kinda r'iled me, standin' up for Ward Stanleigh after all these years he's been tryin' and not gettin' anywhere. He's just a plain failure; that's what he is."

"Ya-uh, guess that's so," put in Mr. Joselyn judicially. He accepted the second piece of cake with an absent-minded air, as of one whose thoughts are too distantly centered to take real notice of mere food. "Ya-uh, Ward wasn't very promisin'. 'Member the time he fell in the river? He was fiddlin' 'round on a plank or somep'n and fell right into the water like as if he'd dove. Couldn't swim, neither. The other boys fished him out. If he'd had much sense, he'd ha' stayed by the good dry land when there was plenty of it all around him; but no, sir, he was a-dreamin' 'bout somep'n and didn't take no notice of the Spinooski River 't all."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Davenway deprecatingly, as she reached for Mr. Joselyn's teacup, "I always thought Ward's dreaming was a good sign—that likely he was working things out in his mind that would kinda get him ready——"

Mrs. Pickering interrupted. "The idear is, you got to get things *into* your mind 'fore you can work 'em out. See?"

"That's the way I look at it," volunteered Mrs. Giddings, economically gathering up scattered frosting on the tines of her fork. "They say Ward was an awful poor scholar. He didn't seem to pay much 'tention to his lessons, and his teachers had a turrible time to learn him anything. He never got nowhere in 'rithmetic." Mrs. Giddings had, in her own youth, given up the school system as a bad job, but she was under the

impression that she disclaimed any such experience by speaking courageously about its having happened to someone else.

Heather could contain herself no longer. She felt the blood coming into her face, and she was surprised at the partisanship which she suddenly felt for Ward Stanleigh.

"You're only proving that he was a dreamer," she burst out with considerable feeling. "Of course he was a dreamer; he is yet. I don't know him very well, but I've seen him occasionally since I've been in New York, and I can tell you that nobody ever went out of Hampton Valley who has worked harder. Why shouldn't he succeed? Dreams! Why, everything we live by has come out of dreams."

"Heather, won't you pass the hermits?" suggested Mrs. Davenway, with an undercurrent of warning.

Heather's shoulders relaxed; so did the taut muscles in her face. She was doing very badly, she told herself.

"Won't you have a hermit, Mrs. Pickering?" She proffered the plate with a smile that was itself an apology.

Mrs. Pickering may not have sensed the contrition, but she was not missing any hermits. She took one, bit into it, and returned the promptest of verdicts.

"These are very good, Eleanor," she cheered her hostess by saying. "But they hain't been kep' long enough. You'd oughter leave 'em a week in a stone jar down sullar. When I was keepin' house, one of my rules was: 'Cream cookies, bake and eat; hermits, bake and keep.' "

"That's a good rule," agreed Mrs. Davenway mildly. "But sometimes I can't get ahead on my baking."

"Oh, well," conceded Minty liberally, "you're a good cook. I tell everybody. All is—— Now as to you, Heather——" She turned to unfinished business for a moment; "you're young, and you don't know as much as you will later." It was evident from Minty's restrained manner that she considered wisdom only a neat synonym for the passage of time. "You've skipped the real point of all we was sayin', which was that if Ward had had it in him to write plays, he'd ha' sold some 'fore this. You can judge the future by the past; ain't no better rule a-goin'. Writin' plays is so easy, anyhow, that it can't scurcely be called work."

"Is it?" inquired Heather sweetly. "Why don't you write some, then, Mrs. Pickering?"

"Simply and only 'cause it ain't my business," replied the lady haughtily. "But if I wanted to write plays, I could do it, let me tell you. I thought 'bout it consid'rable last winter when the Mutual Culture Club put on that play, 'Take Your Sister Along.' 'Member how natural it was? All you gotta do to make a play is to write down a lot of stuff just the way folks talk —and there you are!"

"Sure enough," nodded Heather, as if convinced.

Mrs. Giddings lifted her napkin with a final flourish and shook it over that section of the table immediately in front of her. "What do you suppose," she demanded explosively, "can have become—of Mr. Ransome?"

Zelotes bit into his third hermit and refused to worry. "He's old 'nough to look out for himself. Smart man, all right."

"Very select," assented Mrs. Giddings. "I trust that nothing——"

"Well, I wouldn't fuss, if I was you," advised Mrs.

Pickering tartly. "I ain't sayin' but what he's all right, but there ain't no man livin' that I'd waste no thoughts on."

Minty was a widow by dispensation and by conviction, and she continually implied that she was fending off importunate suitors who hoped to persuade her into a second venture, although so far as known, the hosts of the enemy were wholly imaginary. She frequently said she "wouldn't never try it again—not for nobody"; and invariably she referred to the twenty years of her married life as she might to a shipwreck which she was thankful to have survived. Close neighbors of the Silas Pickerings had maintained that the story of that household was to be found in two volumes, neither complete without the other. But owing to the passing of Silas, Minty's version now had the advantage.

Zelotes rose, strolled to the sideboard, came back with a red-glass hat filled with toothpicks, which he passed hospitably. Several boarders seemed glad of this courtesy. In general good humor, their vivacity somewhat in abeyance because of the heavy tax on digestion, they trooped back to the porch, to break up into groups and presently separate.

Heather surveyed the wreckage on the table. "One meal!" she murmured. "And there are three every day."

Her mother's answering smile was more wistful than amused, and she made no reply. In silence they gathered up the dishes and carried them to the kitchen.

It was nearly dark when they heard Booth Ransome's step on the porch. He came into the dining-room. Mrs. Davenway went in at once, carrying a

fresh cup of tea and the macaroni, which had been waiting in the warming-oven. Heather hung the towels on the patent bars by the stove and hurried out to the barn to make sure that Spark had been well treated.

She went through the long shed that connected the house with the barn, switching on the infrequent lights —Hampton Valley, with its abundant water power, being now wired, even to its patriarchal structures, for the electricity furnished by the village plant.

She ran to the stall. Spark was dripping with sweat; where the harness had rubbed, the lather was still white. Heather's heart grew soft with pity; then hard with indignation. Spark twitched his head high as if expressing his own resentment, but the next moment he lowered his velvet nose in a double search for sympathy and sugar.

"Dear old Spark!" crooned Heather. "He was a mean man. He *is* a mean man." She repeated it again and again, as if she would fasten on Booth Ransome a stigma that would be an admonition to the trusting.

She led Spark out and tied his halter through the ring by the door. She got out the sponge and began wiping him off.

Mrs. Davenway came through the shed and crossed the barn floor with hurrying steps.

"Let me take that." She reached for the sponge.

"Oh, no, I'll do it. It's my——"

"Nonsense! You're not used to all this manual work." Mrs. Davenway took the sponge from Heather's fingers and rubbed Spark's wet coat with deep, rapid strokes.

"Mr. Ransome might have done it," fumed Heather.

"He ain't used to horses."

"Then he'd better not drive 'em. Oh, mother, can't you see how he's abused Spark?"

"Abused?" Mrs. Davenway gave her a fleeting glance of surprise. "Why, Spark hasn't been abused. Of course your father never drove him so hard, but he ain't really hurt. Mr. Ransome explained how it happened," she pursued, working rapidly. "He went half way up Hemlock Knob, and the roads are bad up there. He wanted to get home 'fore dark, but he says he must have drove faster'n he realized. He apologized for lathering up Spark this way."

"What business did he have on Hemlock Knob?"

"I don't know. But it isn't our affair, is it, dear?"

"Maybe not, but I don't see why he should make a mystery of it."

"He hasn't made any mystery. He's reserved, but that's all right, ain't it? I'm terribly sorry, Heather, that you're exaggerating things this way. I've seen a lot more of Mr. Ransome than you have, and I tell you he's got good in him. Just wait a little and you'll see for yourself."

Heather, making no reply, dropped down on the feed-box. She was tired, and yet waves of anger were surging over her, breaking through her weariness, impelling her to do something—she didn't know what. Could it be possible, she thought with distaste, that her mother admired Mr. Ransome? No, she spoke of him with absolute detachment. There was not the slightest trace of the personal in her tone or manner—nothing but neutral justice.

Heather was oppressed by the large, gloomy old barn. There was only one electric bulb, its portable

cord looped over a nail, and it jiggled every time Spark changed position. Being of low power, it left the corners dim. Strange shadows flickered across the beams; the stairway to the mow was a black splotch. Now that the big door was closed, the air seemed curiously suspended; street sounds were muffled. It was like being in prison.

All the girl's buoyant self-sufficiency had oozed away; she felt herself being sucked into an old order that was stronger than any individual, that would mock at her struggle for self-assertion. In vain she reflected that it was only a trick of her physical surroundings, in which everything except the red car spoke of a time that was past. Even Spark was clinging to the present only by the affection that he had built up in previous years. No, it was not merely the surroundings; it was the fact that her mother fitted into them, that she was at home in them, old-fashioned, untroubled by longings for newer things.

Heather watched her intently, with the odd feeling that she was watching a stranger. In the weird light Mrs. Davenway looked different, inscrutable. She seemed larger, taller, a figure of heroic size, of heroic strength. Her shadow added to the impression; it was grotesquely magnified, reaching up the opposite wall and breaking back along the beams. With every vibration of the electric bulb, the shadow wavered tremendously.

There was something magnificent in Mrs. Davenway's firm capability, in the vigorous sweep of her motions; there was something infinitely childlike in her preposterous faith, in her unquestioning credulity. With a little more training, a little more experience,

more penetration into human character, what a fine woman her mother——

Heather caught herself in the midst of this thought. Her cheeks burned with shame. She sprang up and opened the big barn door. Mrs. Davenway had blanketed Spark, and they led him outside, walking him up and down in the dark yard, that he might have no trace of stiffness the next day.

It was Heather who took him back to his stall. She spoke gently to her mother. "You poor dear! You were awfully good to do this. Now you go ahead and I'll switch off the lights."

They went back to the kitchen. Mrs. Davenway washed her hands at the sink and took down the towel that hung by a cloth loop from a nail by the door. There were dark shadows under her fine eyes, but she smiled at her daughter and spoke in a tone of great briskness.

"My little girl is tired—with that long trip and all. Hadn't she better get to bed early? Perhaps tomorrow——" Her voice grew tremulous and she stopped.

Heather was touched. "Mother, darling, I am glad to be home—really I am. I'll go to bed now like a good child and get rested, and tomorrow——" Then she, too, stopped on the word. Neither of them could see how tomorrow would have the magic to smooth out the creases in existence and bring harmony out of irritating elements.

Heather kissed her mother and went up to her room, which was above part of the dining-room. Behind it was Mr. Ransome's room; at the end of the hall, her mother's; on the other side of the house were

two rooms, formerly the "spare chambers," which were now the home base of Mrs. Giddings and Daphne.

One hand flung above her head, Heather groped for the electric lamp, which swung from the ceiling a few feet in front of the bureau, turned on the light, and held the fluted white shade till the cord had stopped vibrating. The Davenways, like all other self-respecting citizens, had grabbed at each modern improvement as it came along and dragged it somewhat forcibly into their house, which had been built before the race expected conveniences. But they disturbed the partitions and the finish as little as possible, so that plumbing stalked through the rooms with a frank tracery of lead pipes through flooring and up walls; a furnace reached its huge tin arms out of the main floor and carried heat to the second story in the full sight of everybody; electric wires raced along ceilings and dropped a lamp here and there, like spiders suspended from their webs.

With her key-ring on her finger, Heather looked wearily at her trunk, which it had pleased Si Hoyt to deliver during the height of the supper preparations. But what did she care about trunks or clothes or the personal niceties that had been important twelve hours before? She threw the keys on the bureau.

"I'm afraid I was a fool when I planned this," she thought heavily. "I wish I could see the lights of Broadway for five minutes—and I'd give *ten* dimes for a seat in an old green bus."

CHAPTER VII

BUT it is hard to be a pessimist if your bedroom faces the east. When Heather awoke in the morning the sun was streaming in at the two windows over the side porch, transforming the worn matting into a warm, beautiful gold and blurring the cheap wall paper into an indeterminate cream color.

It was not a pretty room, but in the early morning it was undeniably cheerful. The furniture was of ash with a raised appliqué of black walnut, a sacrifice of good wood to the insatiable god of ornamentation. Any attempt at a color scheme would have been frustrated by the braided rugs, of which there were several, one having been added every time a worn place had developed in the matting. They had been braided by Grandma Davenway, whose Puritan conservatism had been in abeyance while she was dealing with home-made dyestuffs. Here were no pastel shades, no mellow colors of the Orient; but the violent red of flannel shirts, the violent yellow from smartweed, the blue of untempered indigo.

Heather tucked the pillow comfortably under her neck and gave a sigh of luxurious well-being. She was feeling the natural exhilaration of rested nerves and rested young body, although her eyes, fixed on the white curtains, were still drowsy, lazy-lidded. . . . The curtains were exquisite, of fine muslin with netted white

fringe. Grandma Davenway had made those, too, and had given them to her on her fourteenth birthday. She must run in to see Grandma Davenway. . . .

"How silly I was yesterday!" she thought, with the serenity of one who has left a weakness far behind. "How could I have lost my nerve so easily?"

She no longer had any doubt about the ultimate outcome of her plan, but she speculated about how much time it might take. Well, she had four months; that ought to allow for the gentlest kind of persuasion. She agreed with her mother that they would keep that strip of land by the river, but this house—— They would sell it as soon as Mrs. Davenway could be coaxed or reasoned into giving up her home; and surely, after she had thought about it for a few weeks, she would be glad to get away, to go back to New York with her daughter, to be free, to live the larger life. . . .

Heather sprang out of bed. She made a wry face before the old washstand which had taken the place of the more modern piece of furniture belonging to her set. Doubtless the latter had been needed to complete Daphy's room or Mrs. Giddings's. She thought longingly of running water, of the luxury of a shower. Oh, well, these deprivations were only for a short time.

She lifted the pitcher from the shelf in the lower part of the stand and emptied it into the large bowl, set into a wooden crater in the top. There was a bathroom in this house, but of course it would be monopolized by boarders.

How could her mother be satisfied with these people? This was, Heather knew, the real cause of the irritation that had conquered her the day before. That Mrs. Davenway, finding herself without resources,

should have decided to take boarders, was easily understandable. If she had held herself aloof from them, entrenched in her own superiority, the situation would have been endurable; but that she should be contented in their society, complacent before their whims, approving of what was essentially their selfishness—that was incomprehensible.

Heather, unbraiding her long hair before the mirror in the tall, narrow bureau, shook her comb at her own reflection.

"Now you," she apostrophized, "you could never do that—never. If your life had been different—but not now!"

That was the point—not now. If she had stayed in Hampton Valley all these years, she might have had the same standards that her mother had; she would have been entirely a creature fashioned by inheritance and geographical influence. But fortunately she had broken away from those things which might have bound her; she had become an individual in the true sense, the result of initiative and of reaction to favorable stimuli, alternating in a long series until the original individual was almost wholly superseded.

Heather was acutely and pleasurably aware of her freedom. She was bound to nothing in the past; she was not even bound to those who were nearest by blood; she was herself. And she was herself because she had willed it so, because she had made use of every opportunity that would help to sever her from the small, stereotyped life out of which she had sprung. She had claimed independent entity as her right. It was what progress implied; it was what individuality meant.

In the optimism of early morning, she could not

imagine any obstacles that might limit her independence or deflect her from her purpose. She had not learned the huge difference between dreaming and doing. She had no forewarning that she was about to learn it.

There was only one cord that she recognized as binding her to her childhood and to her family, and that was affection. She loved her mother devotedly. It was what had brought her back. She loved her mother, and she owed her something for these years of sacrifice. Therefore she proposed, in warm-hearted solicitude, to rescue Mrs. Davenway from the pettiness of existence in Hampton Valley, to lift her to wider outlooks, to put her abreast of all the wonderful advantages that awaited one out there in the real world.

And this morning Heather was confident before the undertaking. She slipped into a white linen dress with collar and cuffs of faint rose, and hurried downstairs, looking cool and fresh, feeling securely poised against any ruffling circumstance.

The kitchen was pleasant with the fragrance of coffee and of graham muffins just out of the oven.

"Oh, I'm late." Heather was contrite.

"You're just on time," corrected her mother, with an affectionate smile. "Everything is ready."

They went into the dining-room, and this time Heather felt sure that she attained exactly the right manner in the treatment of house guests. She was gracious without surrendering her reserve—not, she reflected uncomfortably, like her mother, who chatted freely, as if these casual people were welcome to her every thought.

Heather was particularly skillful with Booth Ran-

some. She gave the impression of having no more than met him before, whereas he was evidently on the defensive against possible reactions from the previous afternoon.

Presently Mr. Ransome roused from abstraction. "Main thing on my mind is the strawberry festival tonight. You know how kinda shy I am, but I'm trying to nail my courage to ask you all to go, as my treat. Our whole little family," he expatiated, waving his thick fingers in an inclusive circle.

"Oh, my stars!" chirruped Mrs. Giddings. "You've got such an attenuated way of saying things!"

"That's awfully good of you," acknowledged Mrs. Davenway, as she refilled his coffee cup.

"'Tain't much," he disclaimed gracefully. "I want to do something when I get a chance for a nice little burg like Hampton. I take it you'll all go."

Heather's cool voice broke through the buzzing murmur of acquiescence. "I'm grateful to you, Mr. Ransome, but I cannot accept."

There was an awkward moment, copiously punctuated: by Mr. Ransome's flush of resentment, by Daphy's open-eyed admiration, by Mrs. Giddings's pure surprise, by Mrs. Davenway's manifest distress. Mrs. Giddings was the first to take Heather's part.

"I'm sure we can liberate you," she purred happily.

"Trust Heather to get her own invite," offered Daphy.

"My daughter has had a busy year, Mr. Ransome," explained Mrs. Davenway hurriedly. "I expect she'll feel more like seeing folks after she gets rested a mite."

The color mounted in Heather's cheeks and stayed

there, but she said nothing till she and her mother were alone in the kitchen.

"How could you?" she cried indignantly. "How could you apologize for me?"

Mrs. Davenway poured hot water over the silver in the rinsing pan and set the teakettle back on the stove before she answered. "Why, Heather, I was kinda 'shamed."

"Ashamed! Of me?"

"No-o, not of you," floundered Mrs. Davenway miserably, as she pulled the hot silver out on the drainboard, "but of the way you spoke back to him—so pert-like. Honestly, dear, I don't see why you couldn't accept his——"

"You don't!" flashed Heather, drying teaspoons with prodigal energy. "After the way he treated Spark, do you suppose I'll accept a favor from that man? And after his impudence to me yesterday?"

"But, my goodness me," sighed Mrs. Davenway, "seems like you ought to be big 'nough not to hold a grudge. Don't you know it takes an awful small nature to get hold of a grudge in the first place—a nature more like a pair of pinchers than anything else? Seems the whole thing is terrible small business, like working under a microscope."

Heather lifted her pretty chin proudly. "I'm not holding a grudge—not at all. I shall be perfectly civil to Mr. Ransome, with no reference to the way he's treated me. But I shan't put myself under obligation to him. He needn't think he can hoodwink me. Oh, mother, you've been so protected all your life that you haven't had a chance to learn much about people.

You've always stayed in this out-of-the-way corner of the world, and——"

"I was born across the lake," put in Mrs. Davenway feebly.

"Oh, yes, I know—in another little village, though, even if it was a different state. But you came to Hampton Valley when you were married, and you've never been anywhere else, have you?"

"Why, yes, your father and I went to Boston once, for a coupla weeks."

"So you did. And you saw Bunker Hill Monument and had Parker House rolls and went out to Harvard. But it didn't give you much experience in human nature, did it?"

"Experience?" Mrs. Davenway had now given up the dishpan altogether and was leaning on the sink. Her eyes were bright with astonishment, but her tall figure sagged rather limply.

"I'm not blaming you, mother," Heather went on generously; "I'm only reminding you how different my life has been. I've been around a good deal. I've seen all kinds of people, and I've had to fight my way among them more or less. Naturally I've learned to judge them; and besides, I've been cultivating my intuition all the time. Now when I meet a man that's tricky and unscrupulous, I'm likely to know it. . . . And I'm waiting for more dishes, mother."

"Oh, dishes!" murmured Mrs. Davenway abstractedly. "I forgot about 'em, I guess, but I'll have plenty of time to finish up the dishes when I get this thing through my head. 'Course I knew you were learning a lot all the time you've been away, but I didn't know you

were kinda specializing on wickedness, so't you'd go 'round looking for it——"

"Why, I'm not looking for it. I'd much rather not find it, but——"

"Then don't you know," interrupted Mrs. Davenway gently, "that you'd better expect it ain't there? Folks mostly find just what they expect to find. Seems like the Lord arranged it that way, so't nobody'd be disappointed."

"Oh, mother, isn't that just like you? You're a dear, but somehow you make me feel more like your mother than your daughter. That kind of talk sounds very sweet, but there's no working principle in it. It's an anæsthetic to your reason. Of course you know everybody in Hampton Valley so well that they can hardly deceive you; but when somebody comes in from outside, you ought to be on your guard. And, dearest, I do wish you'd believe that I know a few things about——"

Suddenly a twinkle danced into Mrs. Davenway's eyes. It had been more reluctant than usual; and even now it seemed to be a persistence of habit rather than a sign of amusement. "I'll be only too glad, Heather, to have you give me a few lessons in iniquity, but——"

"Don't laugh at me, mother," protested the girl, with a trace of impatience.

"I'm not laughing. This strikes me as a serious matter, Heather. I think I've got the main principle now—about being suspicious till you're convinced there ain't any grounds for it; but how does it fit in this case? What chances do you reckon I'm taking with Mr. Ransome?"

"I don't know yet. But I feel that he has a scheme.

Why, that invitation was a trick, and you don't seem to see it."

"A trick?"

"Certainly. Doesn't he owe you two weeks' board bill?"

"Ye-es," admitted Mrs. Davenway unwillingly.

"Well, my dear trusting mother, can't you put those two things together? You accept the festival from him, and then how can you ask him for a mere board bill? He can string you along for a while, and perhaps it's his game to skip out and——"

"Heather Davenway!" All the limpness went out of the tall figure; the twinkle was replaced by a gleam of indignation. "Don't let your mind carry you on a free ride to bad lands like that. When a man has a perfectly decent, kind impulse, you hain't got any right to hunt 'round for some mean scheme behind it, just 'cause you don't like the slant of his eyes or something. 'Spite of all you say, I got faith in that man. He gave me a good reason 'bout the board bill; he'll pay in a few days, all right." She plunged into the dish-washing with redoubled vigor; the teacups shot through her deft hands like balls in the performance of a juggler.

" 'Twasn't just 'cause you offended him, either," she continued. "It makes it awkward about your going with me tonight."

"Oh, I'm not going at all."

"Why, Heather, you must. I want you should go. What do you suppose Hampton would say if you didn't?"

"My decision," said Heather, stacking saucers

rapidly, "is no concern of Hampton's. I don't care what the town thinks."

"But I do, dear child. I don't want 'em criticizing you. They'll say you're stuck-up if you don't go."

"Dreadful!" laughed Heather. "How could I endure such disgrace!" She dropped her busy hands for a moment, the better to put her question impressively. "Do you seriously mean, mother, that you would go to that festival for no reason whatever except to conform to the expectations of Hampton Valley?"

"Why, yes, Heather, I suppose I do. So long as I live in Hampton Valley, I've got to respect its opinions, haven't I? I wouldn't do anything I didn't approve of; but when it's something that Hampton just naturally considers a proof of friendliness and village spirit—why, yes, Heather, of course I'd do it, even if I didn't get any personal pleasure out of it."

Heather smiled pityingly. "That's what it is to be bound. Oh, mother, you can't imagine how different it is in the city."

An hour later Heather came downstairs with her hat on. She was carrying a small suit box.

"Do you want to see?" she asked gayly. "I'm going to take this to Grandma Davenway."

She opened the box and shook out of the tissue-paper wrappings a house dress of softest silk. It was of wistaria color with a delicate tracery of white; in the front and inside the wide sleeves was heavy wistaria chiffon.

Mrs. Davenway looked at it in silence.

"Isn't it lovely?" prompted Heather.

"Very. I never saw anything so grand."

"Won't she be delighted?" exulted the girl. She was

vibrant with anticipation of the pleasure she was about to give.

"It's a wonderful piece of silk," parried Mrs. Davenway.

"Indeed it is. I went to four shops before I found it, but I wanted just the right thing. I'm sure Grandma never had anything like this before."

"No, I'm sure she never did. Wouldn't you—wouldn't you like to have me take it over? Or wouldn't you like me to go over first and—and tell Grandma you're home——kinda?"

Heather, refolding the gown, looked up in astonishment. "My goodness, no, mother. Why, half the fun of making a gift is seeing how pleased folks are."

"Yes, that's so," agreed Mrs. Davenway. "More than half, I should say."

But as she watched Heather swing blithely out of the yard, her eyes were shadowed. She shook her head gently.

CHAPTER VIII

HEATHER went out Checker Street and turned on Elmwood Avenue. It was cooler than it had been the day before, and the air was delicious. Fat robins scurried over the lawns, pausing on a full-throated plaint. Maple trees in close file lined each side of the street and met in a feathery arch above it. Being rarely pruned, they were tall and full; in their heavy June foliage they threw a shade that was unbroken except by an occasional point of sunlight. The houses were all clapboarded, and they were large and well kept.

To Heather, there was an appearance of unreality about the residence streets. They had the unbelievable vividness of a chromo. Hampton Valley worshipped trees as did the ancient Greeks; and in June there was no modification of the glistening green of the maples and elms—or, for that matter, of the grass and the gardens and the shrubs, not yet in bloom. Moreover, the record of Hampton's prosperity was written in coats of fresh paint, renewed so often that the gloss was not allowed to grow dim.

Here were none of the grays and browns that are the effluvium from years of weather; here was no smudging from smoke and fog—because every spring, after long months of snow and enforced curtailment of activities, Hampton roused to the business of "freshenin' up a

bit." And it freshened till it glared. Heather, accustomed to Western cities that cover their youth with a fine veil of age, found it hard to understand why this village, which really had age, should be zealous about building up the impression of intense newness.

There was scarcely a sign of human life. Earlier there had been; later there would be; but in the middle of the forenoon Heather had Elmwood Avenue to herself. She might have strolled through all the residence streets without encountering anyone, although if by chance a citizen should saunter into view, it would be some time before he sauntered out again, because Hampton stood for leisure. It had a low opinion of hurry. Therefore speed was confined to dogs and motor cars.

Grandma Davenway was standing in her side door. She was Heather's great-grandmother, and had recently passed her eighty-fifth birthday. She was small and wiry and bent, and yet with the light of interest still in her keen old eyes. Her white hair was smoothed down tight from its middle parting and drawn into a knot on the back of her head. She had on an ugly garment of black calico with tiny flowers in white, a fabric that had been known to the trade as "mourning print."

"I reckoned you'd be comin' in," was her greeting to Heather. She also kissed her—a rare ceremony, but Heather had been away several months.

"Come right in and set a spell," she continued hospitably.

They went into the sitting-room. Grandma Davenway lived alone in a two-story house, which had been her home for more than sixty years, and did her own

work. "Ain't no use in rustin' out," was her motto.

She sat down in her splint-bottomed rocking-chair that had a square cushion tied on the back and a round cushion tied on the seat, and Heather drew up a chair opposite. Beside them was a light stand strewn with bright silks in patchwork blocks. The stand was covered with a piece of linen, blue and white in squares like a checkerboard. It had been woven by Grandma Davenway out of flax that she had grown herself. She belonged to the old New England and as far as possible she lived the older life, surrounded by the modern but deploring it.

"You're lookin' real pretty, Heather," she said next.

Heather was; but if she hadn't been, Grandma Davenway would have said it just the same. It was not a personal compliment; it was a tribute to their family.

The old lady's keen eyes, behind the gold-bowed spectacles, looked her over carefully, but continually came back to the suit box. Curiosity conquered.

"What you got there, Heather?"

"A present for my dear grandmother," bubbled the girl happily.

Grandma Davenway took it. Her eyes sparkled, for she liked presents. But when she had lifted the edge of the tissue-paper wrappings, she stopped. Her small body grew rigid, and she glanced up sharply.

"What is it?"

"Take it out," laughed Heather, with the impatience of a child who cannot wait to have a delightful surprise discovered.

Grandma Davenway looked down at the soft heap of silk and chiffon; then she passed the box back.

"Why, you funny old dear!" cried Heather. "You don't believe it's for you, do you? But it is. Here ——" She lifted the gown free of its wrappings and stood up, the better to show it off. "Isn't it lovely?"

Grandma Davenway gazed at it in a sort of frozen horror. "I don't wear nothin' but black," she said dryly.

"Why, Grandma Davenway, see what you've got on this minute, and everybody knows that black-and-white is lots more striking than wistaria. I had this copied from one that I found——"

The old lady raised one thin hand ever so slightly. "I wouldn't wear it. You might have known."

"Oh, but it's just the right thing. Only try it on. I know it'll be becoming, and—and it'll make you feel young and——"

Grandma Davenway glared. "I ain't tryin' to feel young or look young. I ain't ashamed of bein' eighty-five, Heather Davenway, and I aim to dress befittin' a woman of my years."

Heather dropped into her chair again and laid the soft wistaria silk across her lap. "This is perfectly suitable," she said gently, persuasively. "I knew you wouldn't want anything gay. You will try it on, anyhow, won't you?"

The old lady shook her head.

"But why——"

"I wouldn't wear it, I tell you. Folks would laugh."

"Laugh? No, they couldn't. They'd only admire——"

"They'd laugh," repeated the old lady obstinately.

Heather was silenced. She sat looking at this small, frail creature, suddenly fierce in the defence of something that Heather did not understand. It was not mild difference of opinion or of taste; it was the horrified resistance of the total abstainer before the proffered glass, of the ascetic before some gilded lure. For the first time in her life Heather had come upon Puritanism, surviving intact long after the excuse for its existence had passed. Although part of her ancestry reached back into it, she herself was far enough away not to comprehend that strange, narrow code devised to appease a God of wrath—a code that flaunts humility and denial as a means of gaining favor, that works by steel springs and steel bands, that takes no account of human feelings and makes no response to human influence.

Heather's lips trembled as she folded the despised gown and put it back in its box. And somewhat ruefully she recalled that she had paid a wild sum for it. She had ordered it in one of those exclusive shops half a block from Fifth Avenue, once a dwelling house, but now transformed into a *modisterie*, where the shaded lights burn low and the prices run high. She glanced at the brilliant medley of colors in the patchwork blocks, and wondered again.

"Try it on later, Grandma," she faltered, unwilling to believe that her failure was complete. "I'll leave it here on the——"

"Ain't no use. I ain't goin' to be laughed at."

Heather brightened. "Oh, if that's really all—— Wouldn't you wear something that you liked and that was becoming and suitable, no matter what——"

The old lady interposed firmly. "They'd have a right to laugh."

So that was it—a Puritanism that not only feared public opinion but endorsed it.

"You may's well take it along," commented Grandma Davenway.

Heather's dark eyes opened wide at this final stab to her hurt feelings. "I—I thought I'd leave it. Maybe——"

The old lady's lips went tight. She shook her head resolutely.

The kitchen door opened, and a young fellow thrust his head into the room. He was thin and sunburned, with colorless hair and a ready smile. Heather recognized him as Jack Lamson, whom she had known slightly in school. He lived on a farm up near Hemlock Knob. Between his family and Grandma Davenway there had been a lifelong friendship and interchange of favors.

"Hello, Gramma," he said genially. "Oh, hello, Heth. Wal, now, I didn't expect to see you 's mornin'. I jest heard you was home."

"Come right in, Jack," invited Grandma Davenway cordially.

"No—no, I can't stop. I ain't fit." He glanced down at his stained denim suit and was embarrassed anew. "I can't stop. I jest brung you a present, Gramma."

"A present? Well, now, I know it's somp'n nice if your folks sent it."

Heather stirred uncomfortably. She wanted to warn this kind-hearted young fellow that it was not a propitious time to make gifts, that perhaps Grandma

Davenway was at that moment in a more critical mood than usual.

"What you brought, Jack?" The old lady's eyes were sparkling again, exactly as they had for the suit box. But——

"Why, I brung you a gallon of soft lye-soap, Gramma. We made a hull kittle of it yist'day; and ma, she says——"

Grandma Davenway hopped out of her chair with considerable briskness and started for the kitchen. "Where'd you put it, Jack? I wouldn't like for it to slop on to things. If you'll just set it on a paper on the dreen-board—— Oh, that's what you did, ain't it? You're a knowin' boy, Jack. You tell your ma I'm a thousand times obleeged. Couldn't nothin' ha' pleased me more. I hain't got much use for this here store soap; it's too hard. It don't luther up the water nigh so well as soft soap does."

Heather had followed her into the kitchen, and Jack stood aside, delightedly drinking in this praise of his gift. Grandma Davenway took a long, ecstatic look at the tin pail. It was full of a light brown substance, viscous and of a highly capricious nature. It would neither run like water nor break into pieces like a solid.

"It looks turrible good, Jack. You be sure and thank your ma, and ask her if she can't hunt up some knittin' for me to do. I ain't busy 'nough to suit me. My stars, I'll feel rich with all that nice soft soap on hand."

"Yeh," grinned the gratified Jack. "Ma'll be glad. She'd be powerful put out if you hadn't liked it. You betcha she would."

Heather's fingers tightened on the string of her box.

It was an evident disappointment to Grandma Davenway that she would not stay. There were many things to talk about. Wounded and bewildered though she was, the girl could not doubt the real affection, the real interest, that the old lady was trying to express. The episode of the gown was closed. It had brought out a necessary defence of principle, but it had nothing to do with her sincere love for her great-granddaughter. She followed Heather to the door, and her face grew wistful.

"You'll drop in real often, won't you?" she said. "I—I've missed you a lot."

"Yes, I will, Grandma. I'll come as often as I can."

But as she went down the street, she found herself meditating on problems that were new to her: how soft lye-soap attained pre-eminence; how the wearing of colors became wicked, whereas walking over them in rugs or sleeping under them in patchwork quilts might be permitted by the most conscientious; how normal feminine nature may be perverted after generations of rigid precept, gratuitously evolved. And yet the instinct for adornment is a thing not to be crushed out of human beings. Suppressed, it merely finds vicarious outlet in the household surroundings.

"A parrakeet must be a very sinful bird," thought Heather. "And I wonder how Grandma Davenway can bring herself to eat an orange. . . . Mother knew she wouldn't wear that dress. I wonder how she knew. . . . If I only hadn't said so much about understanding everybody. I needn't have made it so sweeping, but——"

She kept to the outskirts and presently emerged on

the Loopville road a quarter of a mile below Hampton Valley.

Near the road ran the Spinooski River, broad in places, in others rushing madly over the rocks in a narrowed channel. A bend brought Heather into view of the falls and the old Davenway mill.

The latter was a wreck now. Summer visitors in the vicinity took snapshots of it and murmured things about picturesqueness and moss-grown ruins. There had been many years when this mill had ground the wheat and corn for the township, but during the time of Heather's grandfather it had gradually fallen out of repair and had been given up to avoid the heavy expense of new machinery. Its death blow, if it had needed one after that, was the opening of a larger and thoroughly efficient mill at Loopville which now served several towns.

There had been a time when the Davenways had hoped that some business enterprise would be attracted to Hampton Valley and would want this water power, but in all these years no such opportunity had presented itself. Nor was it likely to, because there were many falls on the river, and Hampton, although on the railroad, was too far from markets and distributing centers to be an enticing location for a large manufacturing plant. But disregarding the water power, there was value in the rest of the property, an unusually fine grove of maples and beeches covering the sharp rise of ground away from the river—or there would be value when the new growth had matured. At present there were only a few large trees.

Heather went over to the old board fence at the side of the road. Standing knee deep in thimbleberry

bushes, she speculated about the probable value twenty years hence. It was a large grove, covering a good many acres. At a low estimate the timber would be worth two thousand dollars. Probably it would be worth three thousand, because the growth was thick and the trees remarkably fine. Then there would still be the water power; in the course of twenty years somebody might appear who would have use for it. Certainly there was a strong chance that the Davenways might realize a tidy sum out of this property with no investment except low taxes and patient waiting.

Cheered by this thought, Heather fell into lazy admiration of the green meadows along the river and the yellow clearness of the Spinooski as it ran over the rocks. The purring of a motor roused her. A red car flashed around the bend, veered to the side of the road, and stopped. Booth Ransome leaned out from the wheel and called to her pleasantly. She answered coolly, expecting that he would go on again, but instead he swung out of the car and closed the door with a bang.

"This is luck," he said, coming toward her. "I'd been hoping for a chance to talk to you."

CHAPTER IX

BOOTH RANSOME came up to the fence. He put one foot on the lowest board and took off his hat, brushing back his hair from his hot forehead. It was a gesture curiously unvillainous. His hair was gray at the temples. His eyes were turned toward the river with that wide look that one notices in the nature-lover, whether his gaze be near or far. To her surprise, Heather felt none of that repulsion which had assailed her every time she had seen this man before. She wondered if he managed to give her mother always the impression of harmlessness which she had to admit was her own impression at the moment.

"I've been talking with your mother about this land." He waved his arm toward the grove.

"Yes. She told me."

He gave her a glance, keen but fleeting. "And how do you feel about selling it?"

"I feel just as mother does. It is my judgment to keep it."

He pursed his lips and nodded slowly, as if momentarily taking her point of view. "That's all right, then," he said in an impartial voice. " 'Tisn't my way to try to persuade anybody against his judgment. But I'd rather been waiting till you came. I thought perhaps you'd take a different view."

She shook her head. "No. We should only sacrifice to sell now. In a few years the trees will have more value and——"

"In a few years!" he echoed, with a shrug. "Twenty, at least."

"Yes, probably," she agreed, with the serenity of youth. "But the taxes are small. It's a good investment."

"Maybe—if you'd rather hold on than to realize quicker, and for cash. Then, too, something might happen to the trees—caterpillars or——" He gave her a sidewise scrutiny out of narrowed eyes, but she was looking straight toward the grove and did not see it.

"Nothing is likely to happen, Mr. Ransome. It's rarely that a pest visits this section, and we'll take that risk. Besides, there's the water power. I've always thought a factory would come here sometime."

"Umm." He appeared to consider this possibility. "Yeh; might. Long chance, though. To tell you the truth, Miss Davenway, Hampton is pretty far off from markets. And there's lots of falls along the Spinooski —mountains give it so much grade. But as I always say, the priv'lege of owning things is to run 'em to suit yourself."

She whirled suddenly and looked straight into his eyes. "I've been very frank with you, Mr. Ransome. Don't you think it's your turn? Why are you so anxious for this grove? There's plenty of land along the river."

He met her gaze directly; and after a moment of reflection he smiled, as if she had caught him fairly. "Guess you're right. Well, I'll tell you, though I hain't

said nothing to Hampton about it, 'cause 'tain't anybody's business. But I'd just as soon you'd know. I gotta hunch I could make a little summer colony right about here—some rustic cottages, woodland paths, ferns stuck in the rocks—all that sorta dope. And reason I want your land is 'cause it's high ground —that's some hill for this section—and 'cause of them young trees. They're not too big; just right for shade. Then, too, it's in easy reach of some of the prettiest spots on the river. See?"

Yes, Heather could see. It sounded like a wholly reasonable project. Spinooski County was well sprinkled with city visitors every summer. The Loopville Inn was famous as a resort; Kenner Falls was almost as popular; but there had been no accommodations in Hampton Valley that would attract people in search of a pleasant vacation.

They discussed it for several minutes, and Heather forgot her aversion for this man. Since he had pinned himself down to a definite plan, he had become a frank, understandable person. So mild a plan, too! Nothing mysterious or unscrupulous! She could find no flaw in the plausibility of the undertaking.

"The only trouble," she summed up, "is that we don't want to sell."

"Yes, just that little thing," he nodded. "Oh, well, you may change your minds."

"No, we shan't," she countered, feeling that she owed him candor. He would want to find another site for his colony. "No, we shan't change our minds, Mr. Ransome."

"Might, though. Never can tell. Let's talk it over

again in a few days. Well, I must be getting back to Hampton. Are you going that way?"

"No-o—— Why, yes, I am, but—but I'm out for a walk."

The mocking twist came back to his lips. "I getcha. You'd rather walk in the hot sand than to ride in the old red wagon. Well, gee whizz, I hand it to you for being a high-stepper, all right."

Her resentment, her antagonism, flamed up anew, wiping out the brief confidence that their business talk had induced. She turned away proudly and continued her absorbed contemplation of the river until the whirring of the motor had faded and died in the distance. Then she came back to the road and trudged on toward the village.

It was indeed hot here in the open. The shallow sand caught the sun's heat and reflected it into her face; it was only a spurious coolness that came from looking into the green of maples and poplars and spruces that stood in clumps by the side of the road. Nevertheless, she appreciated the beauty that met her whichever way she turned. The natural setting of Hampton Valley was a continual delight to the eye: the intersecting mountains that encircled it, the river that curved through the valley, and the luxuriant June maturity of the trees and fields. The daisies and buttercups dotted the green with dazzling spots of color. The grass was high and thick in the meadows. Occasionally a ragged pasture pushed in between, like a poor relative, with its hillocks of moss and patches of rank brakes.

It flashed over Heather that Booth Ransome had not accounted for those trips with Spark. Just how

many lines of business did the man have, anyhow? If she were to ask him about yesterday's ride on "the bum back road," would he have a frank explanation for that, too? For a few minutes she had had faith in him, as her mother had, but now her old feeling of intangible suspicion was returning.

"I wonder if it's because mother is sweeter," she thought dolefully.

It did not occur to her that possibly this man had different facets in his nature, each practically independent of the others. She had not got beyond believing that each individual is an average of his various qualities, a composite picture of his own diverse moods.

Coming back to the central part of the village, she began to meet people whom she knew. Some of them nodded, and some stopped a moment. Hampton Valley was cordial, but it didn't intend to spoil any returning wanderers by effusiveness. After having known the delights of Hampton, why did they wander? Only after giving proof of their essential loyalty, could they be received back into the full rights and privileges of citizenship.

With a charming agreement, they all asked Heather the same questions. How did it seem to get home? Didn't she find her mother looking very tired? Was she going to the strawberry festival? No-o??!! Dear, dear, it was to be hoped she didn't feel too stuck-up for village doings. That's what cities did to one. Well, they'd see her again, anyhow.

She had almost reached 'Bial Pember's meat market on lower Main Street when a soft voice called her name. She looked up, to see Miss Cula Clare Leathers,

in garden gloves and wide hat, cutting cinnamon roses from the bush in her front yard.

"I want to speak to you a minute."

Miss Leathers came toward the sidewalk. She was a small, dainty woman in a fussy dress. She had once been very pretty, but her face was too thin now, and her hair was pulled back so tight that it gave her eyes a strained expression.

"I wanted to ask you—— Oh, I meant to say first that I'm glad to see you home and looking so well," she interjected politely, and possibly to ease the perturbation from which she was evidently suffering. "Somebody told me——" She broke off, studying her garden shears in flushed embarrassment.

"What is it, Miss Leathers?" prompted Heather gently. "If there's anything——"

Cula Clare swallowed hard. "Somebody told me—— Is it true that your mother is—is taking mealers for supper?"

"Yes, it's true," smiled Heather. She felt a little embarrassed about it herself, but she couldn't see why it should embarrass Miss Leathers.

"Somebody told me," repeated Cula Clare. "Seeing you go by, I—I just asked. I was thinking—— Well, mebbe I'll see your mother tonight."

Heather felt like laughing at her for being disturbed over the asking of so simple a question; but the next moment, when Miss Leathers impulsively pressed the cinnamon roses into her hand, she was touched out of ready response. There were no more roses on the bush; there were no other flowers in the small, bare yard. It came over her suddenly that there was very little of

beauty or pleasure in Miss Leathers's life, and yet she was giving——

Ever since Heather could remember, 'Cula Clare Leathers had lived in this tiny box of a house between the blacksmith shop and 'Bial Pember's meat market, built so long ago that it had once been on the edge of the settlement. It was a shabby dwelling; its clapboards were so warped that they gave a jiggly effect, like a reflection in a cheap mirror; its white paint had not been renewed in thirty years. It had four small rooms, huddled as simply as tea biscuits in a pan. There was no attic. In summer the sun beat down mercilessly on the low roof; and in winter the cold crept up mercilessly from below, because there was no cellar except under the kitchen, and Cula Clare's parlor was better adapted to the refrigeration of vegetables than to the comfort of human beings. Since the death of her mother, Cula had lived here alone, the last of her family.

"The old Lym Leathers place" was pointed out to visitors as an achievement in antiquity, but it had no more style than a world-worn white cat that has lived a free-lance life and bears the marks of many ash heaps on its unkempt fur. Neither could it have any architectural standing in a community which considered two stories as much the minimum in a house as two eyes or two ears are in the individual, and which had heard of the bungalow merely as an idiosyncrasy of alien regions, like grass huts or adobe shacks.

"Oh, I mustn't take all the roses you have," cried Heather. "Besides, we have some bushes," she added honestly.

"I know you have, but I'd like you to take my roses. They—they're just like your cheeks."

Heather took them and thanked her. And the picture of the fragile, faded woman, standing in front of her bare, lonely house and offering her only flowers to Youth, was one that came back to her again and again in the weeks that followed, each time with more insistence.

She went on into the meat market. Mr. Pember had heard she was back. How did Hampton look? Was she going to the strawberry festival? What! Well, now, it was too bad if she was feelin' too——

Heather picked up her package and fled. If this characterization should be really fastened upon her, it would be a serious matter. To be "stuck-up" is the unforgivable sin. It is social leprosy; it means social ostracism. It is often worse than a moral lapse, which may possess elements of tingling interest and therefore contribute to the dramatic life of the community; and the person who contributes is usually tolerated on some basis or other. But a person who is "stuck-up" is like a grain of sand in a piece of protoplasm, standing no chance whatever of being assimilated into the whole.

Three times before she reached Railroad Street she was called upon to disclose her impressions and intentions. She passed Clif Stanleigh's store. It didn't look prosperous, somehow. There was a display of breakfast foods in one window; boys' suits in the other, with placards. Poor Clif!

She went into Zeke Gilman's hardware store to get some wire screening for the pantry window. They had heard she was back. How did it seem? Didn't she think . . .

As she came out, she met Mrs. Weatherwax, a plump, handsome woman, who never forgot her responsibility as a member of "the upper ten." She had a gracious smile, but always gave one the impression that she was so busy guiding the ship of state as to be obliged to divide her attention.

"If I'd only known you were coming, Heather," she purred, "I should have counted on you to help wait on the tables tonight. We wanted the prettiest girls——"

"Oh, I don't expect to go," faltered Heather.

"Not go! Why, Heather, it's for the Cemetery Association, you know."

"Yes, I know it is," smiled Heather. "But I haven't been home twenty-four hours yet, and——"

"Of course," nodded Mrs. Weatherwax generously. "Always so many things to do! I find it just so when I've been away."

She said nothing about being "stuck-up." Mrs. Weatherwax would not have uttered the expression, but she was capable of paraphrasing it and using the result in private meditation.

Ten feet farther on, Heather met Mrs. Ham Spinkett, whose infant son Eddie had complicated life in the Davenway household the afternoon before. She was a tall, angular young woman with fair hair and roving blue eyes. Surprisingly enough, Mrs. Spinkett thought of something different to say.

"Sakes alive, Heth! Be you movin'?"

Heather looked down in self-appraisal. She was carrying her purse, the suit box, a dozen roses, a package of meat, and a roll of screening. But why not, if she felt equal to the physical exertion?

"It looks so funny!" giggled Mrs. Spinkett. "Don't they deliver where you been livin'?"

"Why, certainly. But I——"

Mrs. Spinkett continued to be amused. "Me, I don't carry nothin'. 'Most ev'rybody delivers right here in Hampton. We may not be a city, but we ain't so behind. And if you're in a turrible hurry, you can get some kid with his coaster for a nickel. . . . Well, you do act in a hurry, don't you? I s'pose you're goin' to the strawb'ry——"

"My gracious!" thought Heather, when she had pulled through this social encounter. "Is it possible that I don't know how to behave so that Hampton won't criticize——"

She saw Lem Tripe coming. She was beginning to feel dangerous.

"Mr. Tripe had better not ask me about the strawberry festival," she said to herself. "If he does, I—I may slap him."

But she didn't. She did something far more unexpected. Mr. Tripe, pale and gaunt but glowingly civic, was moved to pause in his leisurely progress toward his barber shop and address to Heather those remarks which the town agreed were suitable at this time. He had got as far as Question Number Three when Clif Stanleigh came out of his store and joined them.

"Goin' to have big doin's tonight," expatiated Lem. " 'Course you'll be there, Heth?"

"Why, I don't know as I——"

"What!" cried Mr. Tripe, aghast. "Why, 'shaw, Heth, you wouldn't be so stuck-up as to give us the slip first thing, now would you? I gol, Clif, you talk

to her. Hampton ain't goin' to stand for no desertin', now is she? Huh?"

Heather looked at him in exasperation. She caught Clif Stanleigh's expression, half-amused, half-resigned. Did Hampton Valley conquer one, after all? She was still carrying the wistaria gown, approved by Fifth Avenue but repudiated by old New England. Hampton had certainly conquered her on that.

She could stay away from the festival, to be sure, but she was realizing that it would be at the expense of antagonizing the entire community. She had cut herself off from going with the family as Booth Ransome's guest. She could not go alone without more deeply wounding Clif. . . . But there was a way.

Her moment of reflection yielded not so much a decision as an impulse. She gave Mr. Tripe a radiant smile. "I wonder how anybody could stay away from that strawberry festival," she said. "I'm hoping to go. Clif said he might be able to call for me; and if he can, I'm going to be there."

"Well, gol sakes, Clif," chuckled Mr. Tripe, "it's up to you. Guess you ain't li'ble to fail Heth or Hampton, are you? Huh?"

"No," replied Clif Stanleigh, rather gravely, "no, Mr. Tripe, I'll never fail Heather—or Hampton."

Oddly dissatisfied, Heather went on toward Checker Street. She had started out with a feeling of complete independence, and here she was giving in to the opinions——

"But only in little things," she reassured herself. "When the big things come along, I shall do exactly as I think best—exactly. With no reference to Hampton!"

CHAPTER X

THE strawberry festival was held in the park between the courthouse and the school, and it was only through the strenuous efforts of many committees that it was held at all. Tables were arranged with boards and saw-horses; benches were brought from the town hall across the street; tablecloths were lent by anxious housewives who hurriedly wrote their initials in colored thread in a corner of their respective properties. Back of the band-stand a serving booth had been constructed of packing-boxes, boards, saw-horses, and canvas, following an original design by Mr. Jonas Dake, the blacksmith, and probably unique in the universe.

And everybody helped. By four o'clock the Serving Committee was under full steam. Sons and daughters of tender years were constantly arriving at Mr. Dake's booth, bearing offerings of food under second-best napkins and usually burdened with a message beginning, "Ma said I was to be sure to tell you, Mis' Weatherwax——"

By five o'clock the park gave the impression of a colony of ants carrying their larvæ to a new location. Excited women in muslin gowns, efficiently protected by large white aprons, were rushing up and down between the tables, placing dishes and food, cutting cakes into the greatest possible number of pieces, con-

sulting with upraised fingers and a manner of vastest importance. The strawberries had been ordered from Broomfield; in fact, the festival had been appointed a week before the Hampton strawberry crop would mature, that every mouth might water for a fruit that had not been available for many months except at an exorbitant, out-of-season price.

At five-thirty the tables were filled by those who demanded an early supper—chiefly old people and children, whose digestions had been exercised either too much or too little. A dozen of the prettiest girls of Hampton Valley, led by daughters of the first families—like Polly Weatherwax and Minerva Hobart and Delight Bigelow—flitted about with platters of baked beans and plates of sandwiches and potato salad, these being the firm base upon which the menu rested. Afterwards came coffee, cake, doughnuts, and strawberries or ice cream, particular attention being called to the conjunction. Pickles might also be had to break the chain of sweets into desirable segments.

Farmers drove up in their battered motor cars and stalked into the social whirl—many of them fair-haired or sandy, nearly all of them gaunt and stooping from monotonous food and overwork. Each one convoyed a family conscious of too much isolation: a pale, timid wife in a last year's suit that had been made for the rural trade, and a small collection of silent children, solemn-eyed, shy as partridges, with a tendency to giggle voicelessly if spoken to, and slink crabwise behind a parent.

Heather, having made up her mind to go to the festival, arrayed herself in a white dress, slipped a string of carved green beads over her head, and ex-

pected to have a good time. But there were trying moments. When she and Clif entered the park, she could not but know that many groups stopped chatting, that all eyes were turned in her direction, and that the succeeding buzz was concerned with her affairs. It was not because she had been away several years; it was because she was with Clif Stanleigh. In Hampton Valley it is not supposed that a man will invite a woman to go anywhere because he may enjoy her society as a human being, but only because he is contemplating matrimony, with a short honeymoon in Broomfield and ultimate housekeeping in Mrs. Buttles's upstairs tenement. It is not an attitude that makes for easy comradeship.

They met Zelotes Joselyn, swinging back and forth on his heels and toes in a favorite jauntiness. He seemed to be waiting to give them an official welcome.

"Oh, ho!" he called jocosely. "Here come the little sweethearts."

Heather was furious. She could find no shred of nonchalance in her nature. But Clif was not disturbed. He was, Heather perceived, accustomed to these village ways; they no longer rasped him as they did a comparative outsider.

"'Afternoon, Mr. Joselyn," he said carelessly. "Think we're going to have a thunder storm tonight?"

Heather was moved to admiration. Clifton had said exactly the right thing to deflect Mr. Joselyn's thoughts. The few white clouds were probably innocent ones, but Mr. Joselyn gave them a worried scrutiny. He wore a fresh gray suit, with a pink rose in his buttonhole; he was not only appalled at the idea of being caught in a downpour, but equally distressed

at the possibility of giving up an evening of gallant social adventures.

Jabez Mears came up. He was an old man, very deaf.

"Hello, Heth," he quavered, "I heared you was back. Well, well! How long is it you been gone?"

"Eight years." She was docile; also unheard. She raised her voice.

He nodded. "I reckoned it was seven or eight year. Well, well! And how old was you when you went away?"

"I am twenty-three, Mr. Mears," she returned sweetly. She had decided to be generous and do the computing.

"Hay?" He cupped a large fuzzy ear toward her. "Wha' say?"

"I am twenty-three," she shouted. "I AM TWENTY-THREE."

The words had fallen on one of those capricious lulls in conversation. Her personal information had been announced to half the park.

"Oh, Clif," she exclaimed in exasperation, "can't we get away somewhere? Isn't there a corner? I've got to learn how to act before I try general society this way."

They went up to the end of one of the tables, shunned because the slanting rays of the sun reached in on the benches and sent back a glare from the white tablecloth. But they were relieved to be by themselves. They chatted gayly about the happy days in their childhood which nothing could ever erase or modify; those were safer subjects than the affairs of the present.

HEATHER KNEW THAT MANY EYES WERE TURNED UPON HER.

Wylie Chamberlain appeared, looked around as if searching for an agreeable table, and came toward them. He took a seat opposite, and conversation veered away from the past.

"Hello, folks," he greeted them. It was his characteristic salutation and was doing heavy work in building up his popularity. It was now said of Wylie Chamberlain: "Oh, he's one of us, all right. Fine feller! No airs!" And this because, after the years of training which might have made him "stuck-up," he fended off the dread suspicion by studied familiarities.

"Well, Heather," he continued, "how has the first day gone? Have you told 'em all——"

"Sure she has," interrupted Clifton, laughing. "She's given each one a full account of her life, with dates, and wound up by favoring the whole park with a short address on the subject of Heather Davenway. That's why we're sitting here in the wings—finished the first act; waiting for the next cue."

Wylie smiled and took a helping of beans. "No joke about the second cue. You'll get it tomorrow, and it'll be about your plans for the future. Young woman, what are your intentions?"

"Old critic!" jeered Clifton, dislodging a reckless fly from his salad. "They've got to talk about something, haven't they?"

"Safest bet you could make," agreed Wylie, accepting sandwiches. "Good heavens, the number of times I've been through those questions! But then, they mean well." He shrugged tolerantly and selected a pickle. "Pretty good spread, isn't it? I'll warrant you never had one just like it in New York, Heather. I was there for a month about five years ago, and——"

"Oh, were you?" Heather was interested.

They launched into a comparison of experiences, drawing upon the astonishing versatility of the big city in feeding its citizens under conditions made diverse by simply varying the proportions of food, speed, and surroundings. Nourishment becomes a matter of service and financial status. Your stomach may be filled in a few minutes for a few cents; or you may linger in luxurious languor, so absorbed by sounds and colors and accessories that ingenious concoctions in silver dishes are incidentals by the way.

She stopped abruptly, conscious that the conversation had become a tête-à-tête. It had been pleasant to think about New York again, but it had left Clifton out. He had helped her to cake while her attention had been elsewhere, and now he was silently munching his own piece, ignored but unresenting.

Wylie seemed to read her thought. "Beg your pardon, Clif," he apologized. "I forgot you hadn't been in New York."

"Oh, I've been there—same year you were. I went on an excursion—seven days." He smiled. "I spent nearly all the time trying to hunt up better markets to buy from, and in visiting with my brother, but I saw the aquarium."

"The aquarium!" Wylie set down his coffee cup with a click and lifted his eyebrows in amusement. "How'd you pick that out?"

"Why, I started for the Statue of Liberty. I'll be switched if I ever believed the story about the forefinger's being eight feet long and that you didn't realize it when you looked up from the base of the figure. Doesn't seem as if proportion could trick you like that,

does it? I wanted to study on it a bit. I dashed into the aquarium on the way, to get a wink at the sea-horses. One of my kid books had pictures of 'em."

Heather caught Wylie's narrowed glance. She wished Clif would stop, but at last he was roused to reminiscent interest. Nervously she jabbed at her strawberries with her spoon, cutting them into curved slices.

"Well, if you'll believe it," continued Clifton, with a laugh, "I came near never sighting the sea-horses at all, because of the slickest little seal in one of the tanks—taking his setting-up's. He'd swim around that tank like a streak of black lightning and then he'd shoot into the air and repeat. About a hundred of us stood and watched him. Wondered how long he'd keep it up. Gee, he was a nimble rascal, fat and handsome. You could believe he was chuckling with the fun of the performance, and I'll bet he had more brains than anybody in his audience. I stayed by him so long that I had to pass up old Liberty—blamed if I didn't."

"Great guns, Clif, do you mean that one seal was the extent of your sight-seeing?" Wylie's laugh was lightly derisive.

"Sounds kind of foolish, doesn't it?" agreed Clif amiably.

It was foolish, Heather thought impatiently, and Clif had not minimized its absurdity. He might have kept still. Seals were all very well, of course, but one did not pick them out as the paramount offering of a metropolis.

She wondered if Wylie's presence made a difference. It occurred to her that perhaps the two men did not

really like each other and that the strain of pretending, as an item of village diplomacy, was bringing out tokens of irritation in both of them. Certainly Wylie was not at his best, either; he was showing himself critical and supercilious.

Heather determined to give them no further chance to clash. She plunged into gay chatter about affairs of the afternoon, safely removed from personal experiences, and by her forced vivacity kept the ball of talk whirling in neutral spaces.

At half past eight the young people adjourned to the town hall for the dance which was to conclude the benefit. For days Hampton Valley had been rent in twain over the propriety of allowing a dance to swell the receipts for the Cemetery Association. But when the Hampton Valley Band offered to furnish music—free, gratis, and for nothing—there ensued a fight to the finish between New England Puritanism and New England thrift, which cannot endure letting anything go to waste. Thrift won—gents fifty cents, ladies free.

It was one o'clock when Heather got home. She tiptoed into the house and upstairs, but Mrs. Davenway heard her. She came into Heather's room.

"Did you have a good time, dear?"

"Yes, I did—splendid." There were no reservations in the girl's voice.

"That's fine. And now you sleep as late's you want to in the morning. That's what I came in to tell you. Isn't any sense in your helping with breakfast, anyhow—and especially not tomorrow, 'cause there won't be anybody but Mrs. Giddings and Daphy."

Heather, bending her head to take off her green

beads, looked up in surprise. "Where's Mr. Ransome?"

"He's gone. He got a telegram at the festival, calling him to Springfield. He got out his car right away and started." She turned toward the door. "Good night, dear. Remember to sleep——"

"Mother——" Heather, swinging the beads thoughtfully in her fingers, foresaw the answer to the question she was about to ask, and she smiled somewhat pityingly. "Mother, did he pay you?"

Mrs. Davenway paused. She hesitated. "No," she said reluctantly. "But he'll be back in a few days. He said he'd pay me then."

"Poor little mother!" The girl's voice was soft and yet tinged with superior wisdom. "He'll never come back. I knew he was a cheat."

"Yes, he'll come back, Heather." Mrs. Davenway's tone was distressed but firm. "I know he will. He said he would."

Heather laughed faintly. "No, mother, he won't come back. You've only to wait, and you'll see."

CHAPTER XI

FOR several days Heather had delayed broaching the sale of the house. Her inability to influence Grandma Davenway in the matter of the wistaria gown had temporarily shaken her high courage. What if she should find that her mother was inoculated with the virus of that dread disease Habit, which is a sort of chronic epidemic in New England?

She realized that she had always thought of her mother as having a simple nature, acting from transparent motives, and capable neither of concealment nor of unexpected reactions. But in the week that she had been home she had watched Mrs. Davenway with sharpened speculations and with the growing suspicion that there were unexplored regions in her character.

It was the presence of the boarders that had objectified this possibility. Mrs. Davenway was naïvely frank and easy in her treatment of these people, and then suddenly she was quietly independent. Mrs. Giddings could not induce her to serve tea on the porch one afternoon each week; Lote Joselyn could not persuade her to give him three meals a day instead of one. Her refusal of Booth Ransome's overtures about the land was even more surprising. Heather wondered what she would do if she found her own plans breaking like foam against the rock of opposition.

And then one forenoon the subject came up with-

out warning. There was an unusual lull in the housework, so that Mrs. Davenway was mending in the sitting-room, and Heather got out her sewing—a tan voile stamped in a flowing pattern of yellow roses.

"I really don't need that, Heather," protested Mrs. Davenway, waving her hand toward the voile. "Why, I got dresses enough, with that elegant one you brought me and what I had before."

The "elegant one" was a gown of smoky gray embroidered in grays with touches of dull gold, and it had fared very differently from the wistaria. Mrs. Davenway had only delighted praise for its richness and its cut, unusual in Hampton Valley. Heather had been deeply gratified. Also, her mother's pleased reception of the gift had indicated a liking for new things that augured well for further innovations.

There was silence for a few moments; then Mrs. Davenway dropped the mending into her lap and folded her hands.

"What's the big plan, Heather?"

The girl put down her work and stared in amazement. "How did you know there was one?" she gasped.

Her mother smiled. "Land, I've known it all the time since you got back. You're about as successful hiding things as I am. You 'n I are a lot alike in a good many ways."

This was one of the things that Heather did not believe. She could not deny that her mother had penetrated her reserve, but she attributed it solely to intuition. She was sure they were not in the least alike, but it was beside the point now. Eagerly she embarked upon the exposition of her plan—that her mother should sell the house and go back with her to

New York. They would have an apartment. She painted in the details of friends and amusements and advantages.

Mrs. Davenway's calm eyes never left her daughter's face, but she made no immediate reply.

"It's only because I love you," supplemented Heather, as if she might be suspected of ulterior motives.

Mrs. Davenway smiled.

"You aren't so attached to this house that you wouldn't leave it, are you?" insisted Heather. This was her gravest apprehension, because the typical Hamptonite could no more be pried out of his house than a nautilus can be pried out of its shell.

"No," said Mrs. Davenway slowly. "'Tain't with me the way 'tis with most. I hain't lived in Hampton all my life, and as for this house—you were eight years old when we bought it, furnished. No, it ain't that. But I aimed to hold on to it until—well, I thought maybe when you got ready for a home of your own, you might want it."

"In Hampton Valley! Oh, no. I shouldn't——"

"You're sure?"

"Oh, perfectly sure."

"Very well. We'll sell it, then."

"And you'll go with me, mother?"

"Yes, I'll go with you."

How ridiculously easy! That is, unless— "Would you be happy to go?" she forced herself to ask at length.

Mrs. Davenway turned her head, looking out into the sunny garden so long that her daughter grew uneasy. It was evident that her mind was busy with

many thoughts and that the resultant was not unqualified. But her hands had not stirred; and when she looked back at Heather, her face was calm.

"You're all I have," she said simply. "It's my happiness to make you happy."

"But, mother, surely—surely you don't mean that you would miss Hampton Valley."

Mrs. Davenway's dark eyes widened in astonishment. "Not miss it! Why, Heather, child, of course I'd miss it. Hampton's a nice place and I like it. I got a lot of friends here, and they're nice friends. Of course I'd miss 'em."

Heather was silent. She had been away so long that she had overlooked the personal considerations which might weigh heavily with her mother.

"I've lived here twenty-five years," went on Mrs. Davenway. "In that time you get attached to folks and places. But that doesn't mean that I'm not willing to go," she added more briskly, "because I am. Only don't rush me too much, Heather. I wouldn't have taken these boarders if I'd known, but we got to give 'em a little notice. Why, here I was taking more mealers. Miss Leathers is coming to suppers in a day or two."

"Miss Leathers!" exclaimed Heather. "I thought she was awfully poor."

Mrs. Davenway nodded. "I shouldn't wonder if she was planning some in order to do it. She spoke to me at the strawberry festival to know how much it'd cost and whether there was a rate by the week, and it's taken her a few days to decide about it."

"You shouldn't cook so well, mother; it makes everybody want to come."

"It isn't my cooking," laughed Mrs. Davenway. "More likely it's Lote Joselyn."

"What?" Heather's voice was sharp with distaste. "Oh, mother, I'll be so glad to get away from all these things."

The amusement faded in Mrs. Davenway's face. "It's all right to pick out the place you want to live in, Heather, but you ought to go slow in judging Hampton. 'Tain't so different. Life is 'bout the same everywhere, only maybe in a village there's less covering over the machinery."

Heather did not believe that, either, but she said nothing further. The main point was that she had triumphed, although she felt less happy over it than she had expected. She was still confident that she was right and that her mother would ultimately be satisfied with the change, but she was dismayed to find that it should mean a wrenching away from ties that were dear. She intended to remain firm in her victory, but occasional misgivings shot through her convictions and made her restless.

In the afternoon she saddled Spark and took a long ride—to Kenner Falls. But even the exercise was not exhilarating. It was very warm and the roads were dusty. There had been no rain for many days; the young grain was parched, and the heavy grass was turning yellow.

On the way back, Wylie Chamberlain overtook her in his shining black car. She reined out of the road to allow him to pass, but he stopped and saluted her gayly.

"I can't ask you to ride, can I?"

She shook her head and gave Spark's neck a loving

pat. "No. Spark and I are twenty years behind you. It's a gulf that can't be bridged."

"Oh, well, it can be talked across, and that's an art that I've renewed in the last few days." He drew down his face and peered at her from under lowered eyebrows. His voice slid up to a thin squeak. "How long is it you been away, Heth? And how old was you when you went? Well, well! How does little old Hampton look to you now, say? Huh?"

She laughed. "But there's something wrong with the way you do it, because everybody else has got an answer, and you're not going to. My age is a secret from now henceforth forever, and as for the way Hampton looks——"

"I have the answers already," he countered. "I can even go further than you can. I not only know how Hampton looks to you now, but also how it'll look after you've been here a few months."

"You do?" she exclaimed in astonishment, for the banter had left his tone. "How do you know?"

He gave a light laugh. "Been through it. I know you get to the end of Railroad Street before you think you've started in on it; you're sure the houses have been varnished; and you don't understand why they've got nine churches and no Community Center. I can tell you the specific gravity of table talk, and how much noise a cricket makes when he chirps in an empty world."

"It does sound as if you'd been through the first stage," admitted Heather. "What is the second?"

"It's no wonder you ask, because you haven't stayed here long enough before to find out, but this time you'll reach it. Why, after a few months in our beautiful

village, you will have undergone a gradual, wholly painless adjustment. You will be one of us.

"You will become secretary of the Mutual Culture Club; you will plunge into a swirl of uplift, with bridge parties for fill-in's. You will spend a great deal of time telephoning other women about refreshments, particularly cake, for all sorts of entertainments. I see you greatly worried about cake; it will become an obsession. You will be a frequent visitor in Loopville and Kenner Falls; the Itemizer will so state. You will be troubled if the house isn't painted in June and the bushes pruned in October. You will complain because it is so long a walk to the post office. You will——"

"My gracious, Wylie, you give me apprehensive shivers. No, Spark, you needn't turn your head at me. We're going to stay till we've learned more of these important things. Tell me, please, Mr. Soothsayer, is this all there will be in my life?"

"Let me look again." Wylie made magic passes above the wheel of his car and bent over it in the best manner of the crystal-gazer. "I see more; much more. I see a buzz of announcement. I see showers—not electric storms, but electric appliances. Mixed showers! Guest towels and eggbeaters! And all this precipitated by one of our most prosperous and popular young men! The best wishes of a large circle of friends will go with you to your new home, which, by the way, you must remember to paint in June and——"

"Well, I hope that wouldn't be my responsibility," smiled Heather. "If I stay inside the house and worry about cake, I should think the outside would belong to——"

"Ah, now you are hinting for the name." He gazed

again into the wheel. "Yes, here it is—no, something shuts down. I cannot see. It doesn't matter; it's always the least important detail; and I swear to you that the rest is at this very minute set up in the office of that progressive sheet, the Hampton Valley Itemizer, waiting to be shoved into the combination."

Heather's eyes crinkled. "I believe it." But immediately her face sobered; rebellion glowed in her expression. "That's what I hate most about a small place. You know, and everybody else knows, just what you're going to do before you do it. There are only a few things that you can do; you have no choice. It would be the same thing over and over until—until I got those other lines of type that are all set up in the Itemizer office, too: 'She was a woman of sterling qualities, a kind neighbor, held in high esteem by all who knew her.' Isn't it awful?"

He threw back his head and laughed heartily—laughed as one does at a child that is being solemn, and ridiculous at the same time. "It's only life anywhere, Heather. The difference is that Hampton's phraseology is worn a little thinner, but we're all tethered pretty tight. Rope may be a bit longer in a large place, but the stake is driven in just as hard."

"Yes, of course, tethered to Life," she agreed slowly, "but don't you like as long a rope as you can get?"

He shook his head. "This is where I disappoint you. No, I find it interesting to see how much you can do when the rope is short. Keeps your wits just as nimble, and you don't need a very long rope to enable you to roam around and haul in considerable bacon."

Heather was silent, wondering what he meant, fearing she would seem inquisitive if she asked.

"You'd be surprised to know how much business you can build up right here in Hampton," he continued serenely.

She thought of Clif Stanleigh; she was sure that wouldn't be his report.

"That's fine," she said vaguely. "I had no idea there would be so much—so many legal tangles in a small place."

"Well, you'd be surprised," he repeated, with a shade of pride. "I don't want to get any busier. Of course, though, I've got other interests besides the law. It's all right to scorn the small town, Heather, if it amuses you; but I can tell you there are a good many feathers to be gathered up right in little Hampton. All you have to do is to lay your plans and keep your head. Maybe you'll find some feathers yourself if you look around."

After he had left her, Heather jogged on slowly, her mind so occupied with a new puzzle that she allowed Spark to have his own way in the matter of speed. Wylie Chamberlain, after years of training and travel, was apparently satisfied with Hampton Valley. What had he found in it that she was missing? Incidentally she asked herself what his "other interests" were.

CHAPTER XII

BOOTH RANSOME had been gone a week. Heather, thoroughly convinced that her lack of confidence had been well grounded, wondered what her mother was thinking now about the man's easy promises, but his name was not mentioned between them.

And then one hot, windy afternoon the red car swung again into Mrs. Davenway's yard. A few minutes later Booth Ransome strolled into the kitchen, where Heather and her mother were washing the dinner dishes.

"Here I am," he rumbled informally. "Got hung up longer 'n I expected. I'll bet you thought I'd skipped for good 'n all."

"Oh, no, I didn't," disclaimed Mrs. Davenway cheerfully, as she arranged a cascade of baking tins on the warming-shelf. "I knew you'd come back."

"Huh?" He paused on his way to the table and gave her a glance of astonishment. "How'd you know I'd come back?"

"Because you said you would." Mrs. Davenway returned to the sink with the iron potato kettle and began scraping it with a knife.

He wheeled slowly and looked after her with an expression of amused contempt. Then his eyes met Heather's; and there passed between them a message

of understanding, too swift to be checked, too abominable to be endured. It was a look that established an odious bond between them, a look that acknowledged their identical estimate of this unsophisticated, foolishly credulous woman and set them apart from her—and at the same time together, by some monstrous trick of similar judgment.

The mental interchange was only a flash. It was as if two forces, diametrically opposed, had intersected on an element held in common but being carried in different directions. Booth Ransome's simultaneous lifting of eyebrows and shoulders was eloquent of scorn. Heather's cheeks flamed; her eyes were full of the light that is reflected from the deep fires of self-loathing.

She hated herself fiercely for disloyalty to the claims of blood and of love. She was shaken by a passionate desire to shield her mother from the piercing shafts of cold criticism, to enfold her in affection, safe from the tests of rationality. Her rage at her own thoughts overflowed to include the man who had shared her moment of self-revelation. From that instant her distrust settled into a profound, steady aversion.

He took out a long leather pocketbook and extracted several bills, which he laid on the table. "I s'pose you knew I'd come through with my board, too," he threw out, with a sarcastic laugh.

"Why, of course." Mrs. Davenway gave him a smile over her shoulder and reached for the sandsoap.

"Huh! How do you get so smart—knowing all these things?"

"You promised it; that's how," Mrs. Davenway reminded him, rinsing the kettle and carrying it to the stove to dry.

"Good Lord!" He snapped the elastic band around the leather case and slipped it into an inner pocket. "You're the durndest! Do you believe everything that's told you?"

She turned toward him with a good-natured smile on her tired face. Her tall figure was somehow majestic, even in the ill-fitting gingham dress. When Mrs. Davenway was still, she was still; and that rare quality gave her the dignity of perfect coördination.

"No," she said with gravity. "No, to be sure I don't."

He considered this thoughtfully. His idle questioning had led him into real puzzlement. "Sounds like you're complimenting me mighty high," he laughed.

"I ain't complimenting you at all," she contradicted lightly. "All is, I got the feeling that you'll do what's right, and that's broad enough to cover a coupla weeks' board bill—easy."

His thick fingers tapped absently on the table as he met her gaze through a moment of silence. He seemed surprised and considerably abashed before her expression of limpid innocence. In spite of the simplicity of her reasoning, there was about her the suggestion of a force that could not be dismissed with a derisive laugh, a force that gave her poise and conviction.

Heather, pretending to dry the cooking spoons, watched them curiously. How could her mother repudiate the man's own estimate of himself?

Booth Ransome started for the dining-room. Then he turned back, as if a new thought had occurred to him.

"You understand this was only temporary." He waved his hand toward the bills on the table. "I was

cramped for a few days, but I got plenty of cash now. And I'm still behind that offer for the land—minute you say the word."

Mrs. Davenway shook her head. "No. We're going to keep it."

"Sure?" The question was casual, but his keen eyes searched her face and then darted in Heather's direction, as if for evidence of weakening.

"Perfectly sure," confirmed Mrs. Davenway pleasantly.

"All right. Just's you say. I got my eye on another piece of land, but I was giving you every chance, in case you'd changed your mind."

It was astonishing, Heather reflected, that her mother should hold firm on this point when she was usually yielding before the wishes of others. But she was so thankful about it that she refrained, when they were alone again, from uttering the sharp comments that were uppermost in her thoughts. Any remonstrance would sound unkind, besides being essentially futile. Worse still, the weight of her opinions had been notably lessened by her having been wrong in all her prognostications. Booth Ransome had done everything that she had declared he would not do. He had come back; he had paid his bill in full. There was no indication—in action, anyhow—that he was not the soul of honor.

And yet her aversion was deeper than ever. Having no substantiation and no outlet, it seethed within, the stronger for repression. To think that she and her mother must wait on this man! But of course people who kept boarding-houses had no independence; they were paid for giving it up.

The weather added to her irritation. The wind blew in violent gusts, billowing into the house with an uncanny burden of overheated air. There was still no sign of rain; all the moisture seemed to be gone from the world.

Heather determined to change the course of her thoughts. She would take some roses to Grandma Davenway and then go to see Kitty Judevine, who was always lively and diverting.

Coming out on the back porch, she dropped her hat on the bench and went down into the garden for the roses, looking cool, at least, in a white voile with accents of pale green.

Before she had finished her bouquet, Clif Stanleigh came around the house with an armful of groceries. Half hidden by a lilac bush, she watched him, unobserved, as he rounded the steps and dashed into the kitchen. He looked tense, unhappy, in this moment of being supposedly alone. How ironical it all was, she thought—that Clif should be reduced to the routine task of delivering groceries, and that her mother should be reduced to ordering those groceries for a household of boarders!

As Clif came out again, a gust of wind swept through the garden and dislodged Heather's hat from the bench. It flopped to the porch floor in front of him. He picked it up; but instead of putting it back on the bench, he stood there with it in his hands, motionless, looking down at the foolish bit of straw and ribbon as if it had caught his thoughts and decoyed them away from his control.

From idly observing, Heather stared at him in amazement and something approaching panic. He

seemed to change before her eyes. There was no trace of the boyishness that had recalled their childhood games, nor was he now the somewhat worried, tense young man who had stood there three minutes before. He appeared old, broken, beaten, a forecast of himself as he might be thirty years hence—such a forecast as one often sees momentarily when Age leaps up from some corner in the House of Youth and peers from an unguarded window.

Heather tried to look away, realizing that she was inadvertently sharing a moment of suffering that belonged sacredly to another, yet her eyes refused to move. She hoped he would not see her. But presently he lifted his gaze and looked straight at her through the branches of the lilac. To her relief, he showed no transition of self-consciousness. Then it came over her with a surge of sympathy that perhaps these depths of misery were so habitual that they had lost all sharpness of demarcation.

He came down into the garden, holding out her hat.

"Naughty child!" he said whimsically. "That is one of your old bad tricks, playing around in the sun bareheaded."

She smiled, but she took the hat obediently and put it on. "Has Tom Davis deserted you again?" she asked, floundering for a casual topic.

"He's really sick—indigestion this time. I've got a boy to help in the store. Fact is, I'm glad of an excuse to get out a little. I'm indoors too much."

"Oh, Clif," she cried impulsively, "why don't you sell the old store and do something else?"

He laughed. "You make it sound simple, Heather.

What is the something else that you would have me do—in Hampton?"

She snipped a cluster of cinnamon roses from a bush, hesitating over her answer. It would sound more convincing if she could suggest definite possibilities, but none occurred to her at the moment that seemed feasible in the limitations of Hampton Valley. Wylie Chamberlain had assured her that plenty of such possibilities existed, however, and his statement was the evident result of prosperous experience, but he had not given her any details.

"You ought to know what you could do, better than I," she said at length. "I haven't been back long enough to know what's going on, but I understand there are lots of chances to make money even in Hampton if—if you look for them."

He seemed astonished. "Who told you that?"

She cut another rose, but made no answer. He did not press the point.

"I shouldn't suppose Hampton would justify much more business than it's got now, Heather. I've thought about changing to something else, because the store was not of my choosing, but——"

"Then you'll find the chance," she interrupted eagerly. "I'm sure there are ways of making money here."

He gave her a queer, puzzled glance, as if wondering how much lay behind the words. "There are several ways, of course," he agreed slowly, "but I hadn't thought of trying any of them. You've got to be adapted— And then besides, I'm tied to the store."

"Oh, that!" She brushed this obstacle aside as being of slight consequence. "Somebody always wants to

buy a grocery store. I'm sure you can get untied right away if you want to."

"Maybe," he returned, without conviction.

He needn't have been so phlegmatic about it, she thought afterwards. He couldn't expect to do better for himself unless he could show some interest and initiative. She felt disappointed that he had not attacked the problem with more zest.

That night Heather could not sleep. The wind continued to blow, hot and dry, so that the more of it one got, the more distressed one felt. She tossed and turned between the homespun linen sheets, searching for that physical relaxation that would tip her over into oblivion. But her skin was hot and dry like the air that enveloped her, and her mind was racing round and round among gloomy thoughts. Her room seemed possessed by one of those imps that sneak about in the night and point steady, taunting fingers at one's daytime plans.

If only some cheerful things would happen! She wished Booth Ransome had not come back. Better to have lost the board money than to have him a member of the household again. And Clif! Why couldn't Clif have had better luck? Or why couldn't he have more spirit? She felt sorry for him, and she hated feeling sorry for people. It tore you all to pieces, and there wasn't anything you could do about it, either. Of course, it was Clif's fault somehow—a lack that he would overcome if he had more—well, more of the something that he lacked.

She turned on the light—she had unwound the cord to reach over the headboard—and read for an hour. Then she tried again for the land of dreams.

When she wakened, it was with the feeling that she had been asleep for hours. She had heard a noise in the hall, on the stairs, she thought—the sort of noise that suddenly blares through a person's efforts to make no noise whatever. She leaned on her elbow and listened. . . . Booth Ransome's door opened softly, closed. . . . After a while she heard him moving about his room, very quietly.

She switched on the light and looked at her watch. Two o'clock!

"H'm! The opera held late," she thought cynically, recalling his ready explanations. "Parsifal at the town hall, maybe! But if you ask me, I'd say mother's angel boy's been down to the poolroom."

Finally she drowsed off again. But just as daylight was creeping into the room, she was startled awake by a sound from outside—the familiar, newsy voice of twelve-year-old Cally Tripe.

"Fire!" intoned Cally joyously. "Fi-i-ire! Mis' Davenway, y'r woods is on fire."

Heather sprang up and reached for her clothes.

"Mis' Davenway!" screeched Cally, with a piercing whistle. "Mis' Davenway! Y'r woods is on——"

Mrs. Davenway ran through the hall and shouted from the window. "Yes, Cally; yes."

The whole house was astir.

CHAPTER XIII

HEATHER dressed with frantic haste and flew into the hall. Daphne, in a rose pink negligee, was standing in the doorway of her room. Behind her was a sketchy shape that clung to the friendly shadows.

"Anything we can do?" offered Daphne in a sleepy drawl.

"No; no." Heather flung the monosyllables at her with an amusement that suddenly flickered through her anxiety. A picture of Daphy stemming a forest fire jiggled inconsequentially before her as she sped downstairs and through the dining-room. On the side porch she found her mother and Booth Ransome.

"I'll have the car out in a jiffy," the latter was saying. "Take you right down."

They waited without question, staring silently toward the street, now flooded with the gray light of dawn. The eastern sky was flushing above the heavy foliage of the village trees. Cars were going down Main Street with unusual frequency. Doors banged here and there, and little boys cut out of yards with joyous whoops of excitement.

Heather and her mother got into the car, and they joined the procession through the village. The deep natural stillness of early morning emphasized the sound of hurrying footsteps on the walks, the purring of cars

around the corners, the banging of kitchen doors, as sudden and decisive as the explosion of corn in the popper.

The low wooden buildings on Railroad Street looked forlorn and tawdry with the wide shades drawn and the battered doors closed, and no bustle of activity to distract the attention. The high wind raised the dust in the street and sent it scudding over the sidewalks. Paper bags and fragments of newspaper were dragged over the asphalt and came to rest momentarily by an electric-light pole or a shallow flight of steps. The wind had changed direction and was bringing the smoke into the village.

Ransome was the only one who found anything to say. "Let's hope it ain't your woods at all, Mrs. Davenway. Somebody may have made a mistake."

"Everybody knows my land," she returned quietly. Her face was grave, but she gave no sign of perturbation. Heather, on edge between dismay over their probable loss and her mounting suspicion about the cause of that loss, was held for a moment by her mother's poise. It shoved material happenings into essential insignificance.

But as her eyes strayed to Booth Ransome's hands on the wheel, distrust of the man filled her mind again. She recalled his coming in late last night—or rather, early this morning—at two o'clock. If it proved that the fire had only just started, she would have to exonerate him; but if it had been burning two or three hours. . . . How could anybody have faith in a man with thick red hands like those? Then she noticed how deftly their slightest twist guided the car, how

short the fingers were. They indicated quick decision, resolute execution.

The car swung around the bend above the falls, and she caught her breath before the sight that met them. The wooded hill that had been part of their hope for the future, was a tangle of flames. A mighty rope of black smoke, woven of many strands from the burning of many trees, wavered heavily above the fire, to be frayed and scattered by the gusts of wind and yet to be constantly renewed so that it was as heavy as ever. Gay sparks mingled with it, and embers that carried the seeds of destruction for a considerable distance. The old mill was a heap of chalk-white ashes. It was evident that the fire had started on the low ground and spread upward over the sharp ascent—unless it had broken out in several places, and that was hardly possible from any chance cause.

The main group of villagers, chiefly men and children, had collected on the opposite bank of the river, and Booth Ransome drove his red car skillfully into the outer fringe of spectators. As Heather stepped out, an uncontrollable impulse made her ask him: "How long has it been burning?"

She felt his sidewise glance of surprise. He delayed replying while he cast a speculative look toward the fire, as if calculating conscientiously. "I couldn't tell you," he said coolly. "Prob'ly not long—everything's so dry from all this wind and——"

"It's been burnin' two or three hour," contradicted Ezra Sykes, night watchman at the foundry, who had painstakingly strolled close enough to the red car to lend an attentive ear to any developments among those most intimately concerned. He was the chief orator of

Bean Brothers's bench—a tall, loose-jointed man, rabidly interested in news. "Wind wa'n't right to blow the smoke into the Valley, or we'd ha' knowed it sooner."

Heather's gaze was on Ransome's face. No further words were spoken between them, but their eyes exchanged messages that neither would forget—accusation on one side, insolent nonchalance on the other.

Heather and her mother moved nearer the river, to get a view unobstructed by trees. There was nothing that anybody could do to check the damage. The fire had been a raging furnace when it was discovered, and there were no means of fighting anything of this nature in Hampton Valley, where in a normal season the frequent rains precluded the danger of grass and forest fires.

Fortunately this strip of land was cut off from other trees and from fields of hay and grain, being bounded by the river, the road, and two pastures. Men were tearing away the board fences, along which the fire had begun to travel, but they could not go very near. Occasionally one of them darted forward in an effort to save more of the fence, and a cry of warning went up from the other bank. Now and then a brand fell in the field across the road, and the men followed, crushing out the circle of flame before it had a chance to spread.

The sun had come up over Hemlock Knob, fading the flames to pale yellow and touching into unreal loveliness the beautiful valley and the low green mountains that encircled it. Gradually the fire died down, so that one could see the individual young trees, like twisted torches. The few of older growth stood out

above the flames, holding their singed, smitten leaves from the devastation that was raging around their trunks.

The townspeople, somewhat sated with watching, came up to Mrs. Davenway with consolation and personal impressions. Heather found herself so much diverted by their attitude of thoroughgoing gloom that she emerged into unexpected cheerfulness.

Mrs. Tripe came forward pithily. "What I always say it: Blessed be nothin'. It's them that has, that must lose."

Mrs. Dingwall flung the epitome of her reactions over her shoulder.

" 'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth,' Mrs. Davenway. It may be all for the best, you know. Oftimes the greatest good comes out of evil."

Heather caught her mother's eye, and they exchanged a glance of understanding—interrupted, however, by old Jabez Mears, who quavered at Mrs. Davenway in a high, thin voice.

"Well, there ain't no use cryin' over spilt milk. Looks to me like 'twas sparks from the engine 'at started it. I tell you, these here modern inventions brings a lotta trouble along with 'em. We was happier in the old days when we didn't have so much."

"Ya-uh, world's goin' backwards alla time," sighed Mr. Jonas Dake, the blacksmith. "Times ain't what they was. But we all got our troubles, Mis' Davenway, so we're all in the same boat. What can't be cured must be endured, as the old proverb says; and it's jest as true today as 't ever was."

Booth Ransome sauntered up. "Take you back any time you're ready. The folks that have property

'round here have fixed it up with some of the little boys so't they'll stay and watch, in case the fire should spread anywhere."

"I'm ready," said Mrs. Davenway.

"I'll walk, thank you," said Heather. She tried to be pleasant about it, but she could not be persuaded to change her mind. She had accepted this man's courtesy in the first shock of the news; but now that her thoughts had coalesced into suspicion, she would accept nothing further.

Mrs. Davenway went back in the red car, and Heather plodded up the grade toward Hampton. As she reached the bend above the falls, she heard Clifton Stanleigh's voice behind her.

"Terribly sorry to see those fine trees go," he began, in the full tone of real sympathy. "They would have made mighty valuable timber if they could have matured."

She swung toward him in mock terror. "Clifton Stanleigh, don't you dare tell me that this fire was handed down out of heaven to discipline the Davenways into a state of grace."

He laughed. "Not the slightest danger. I don't believe that. I fancy the Lord is busy with a wholly constructive plan and that His agencies are far more subtle. As near as I can make out, our troubles are usually the price of our liberty of action. We get our strings twisted and tangled, one person's with another's; and if we let that happen, a jerk on one string pulls another one taut or breaks it altogether."

Heather smiled faintly. This sounded like the Clif who had written to her through the years of her absence—always hunting for reasons, always trailing

theories and hoping for solutions. She had been home long enough to find out that Hampton had no particular interest in Clifton Stanleigh, considering him a financial failure and therefore of little consequence. Hampton treated him tolerantly, but without enthusiasm and without faith. Undoubtedly this lack of fellow-feeling was one factor that had driven Clif into omnivorous reading—and from that, into the realm of speculation. Heather had realized in the last few days that Clif's theorizing had an element of pathos in its origin, but his manner never made a plea for sympathy.

"We certainly let the strings get tangled," she agreed. "But think of trying to straighten them with proverbs! That's a point on which I can endure no more. If you quote a proverb to me right now— It never rains but it pours, or something like that— I shall probably box your ears."

"You'd have precedent for it," he chuckled. "You've done it more than once—in a fine, upstanding manner, too. My ears ached for an hour that time you corrected my boldness in washing your face in the brook after you'd stamped all over my kite because I wouldn't fly it among the trees."

"Oh, Clif, I believe you remember every bad thing that I ever did."

"I remember everything that you ever did," he corrected, with sudden gravity.

She veered hastily away from the subject. "You haven't told me— Is it possible that these people live on proverbs all the time?"

"Oh, no; not all the time. But trouble brings them out, just as rain brings out the earthworms."

"I don't call it very original."

"Human beings aren't original, Heather. Why should they be, when imitation will get them through life? The average individual spends three quarters of his life exuding what he has absorbed whole in the other quarter. You can't expect him to think."

"Can't I, indeed!"

"Certainly not. It might make him restless and disturbed. Perhaps if any proportion of the people were to think and act for themselves, it would throw out the entire pattern of human living. As far as the world is concerned, millions of people seem to exist chiefly for the purpose of carrying the life sap on to other generations that may possibly do more with it—and may not."

"Good heavens, Clif, what pessimism! Won't you feel more hopeful about the universe after breakfast?"

"You're the pessimist," he laughed. "This is one of your old tricks—scolding me for something that you started yourself. You began this whole thing by criticizing Hampton for talking in proverbs. But what if it does fling them out freely? Hampton is rather accurately and endlessly duplicated all over the country. If Ratty Dingwall, or somebody else, poured his feelings into a neat little ready-made proverb and handed it over to you, he was only doing exactly what our writers and speakers and social groups do everywhere. Poor old Shakespeare has been pecked into fine bits to furnish a pungent flavoring for thousands of otherwise tame and commonplace remarks.

"The people to whom you are accustomed may quote from Browning and Burns and Nietzsche and Plato and Anaximander and dig up the reflections of Marcus Aurelius and Homer and the merchants of

Bagdad, but it's all the same thing. They say, 'Confucius observed,' and 'As my distinguished predecessor has told you,' and 'Let us consider what the poet has aptly expressed.' Just so sure as anybody puts a fragment of common experience into convenient tablets of predigested conversational material, he presents a labor-saving device to thousands of the lazy or inefficient. I'll admit, however, that the range of quotations may be wider in some other sections, with perhaps less reliance upon the proverb in time of trouble, but a certain loyalty to Hampton forbids my working out the reasons."

"I suppose you're right, Clif," said Heather, more humbly, "and I've no doubt I do as much quoting as anybody else, although I'm not often conscious of it. I've lost the quotation marks if they belong there; but assuredly I don't intend to think only what somebody else has thought. Probably, though, it wasn't the proverbs that set me off, but the fact that they were all gloomy. My gracious, Clif, I'd forgotten how little real cheerfulness there is in Hampton Valley. We thought we were gay when we were youngsters, didn't we? But I'm beginning to think there isn't a grain of humor in Hampton. It's gloom and seriousness and——"

Clifton smiled. "I agree with you that this isn't the fountain-head of cheerfulness. You couldn't expect it. The people that settled this state were keeping a vigilant eye on the next world; they frowned on the pleasures they could get out of this world, even though they nipped into them now and then. That wasn't an attitude that encouraged taking things lightly and serenely.

"It's much the same today. Vermont hasn't changed greatly in some ways, because it gets very little new blood in its veins. The people that come in don't belong to the same race, so there's no real modification. And the young people are crowded out by the limited business possibilities. They get out—if they can."

His voice had an edge of bitterness that told Heather he was including himself in the category of those who had no real place in the business life of the town and were doomed to mediocrity or failure. She longed to say something that would be kind and comforting, but she felt suddenly clumsy before a situation which she did not yet fully understand. It was a relief that their ways parted at the corner; it gave her an excuse for ignoring the subject.

But although Heather and Clifton had ruled a sense of humor out of Hampton Valley, the village would by no means have ratified this decision. Of course Hampton had a sense of humor—keen, too. One had only to ask Lem Tripe.

"Humor?" Lem Tripe would have exclaimed. "I gol, you betcha. Why, we got some of the funniest jokers there is in the hull of Spinooski County. Now you take Ratty Dingwall, for instance. Say, I 'member one day last winter the thermometer was foolin' 'round at forty below, and Ratty he come down street fannin' himself with his handkerchief—and here him in woolen mittens, too. And he says to everybody, says he: 'Turrible hot mornin', ain't it? I gotta go right back and get my palm-leaf fan. Howja s'pose I forgot to bring it?' I gol, 'twas gosh-durn comikul, way he said it. He had us all laffin'. Idear of your

askin' if we got humor! Lor' bless you, man, we're full of it."

Yes, Hampton Valley was full of it, but only of a certain kind. There were phases of humor that Hampton would have none of—those phases that cajole men into taking disasters with a smile. That attitude Hampton could not condemn too sweepingly. When things go wrong, you ought to feel sad and mourn and be chastened in spirit, and thereafter meeker in your expectations. That is what things go wrong for. It is only a frivolous nature that is happy when everything is arranged for his being unhappy. It shows a deplorable lack of balance to be cheerful in the midst of depressing circumstances. And Hampton stood for balance.

Because life is a serious matter, consisting largely of trouble from one end of it to the other: being born, which means a trouble to your family; getting a livelihood, which means trouble to you; and dying, which is a sky-rocket of trouble. No, life is serious, and it should be taken seriously.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Heather reached home, she found her mother spooning the batter into the muffin pans. The sunshine was streaming in at the east window; the teakettle was boiling; Mrs. Davenway, in a fresh gingham dress, was calm and busy. She looked up with a serene smile; apparently she was untouched by any of the hot feelings that had assailed her daughter.

"She doesn't care as much as I do," Heather thought, and at the same time knew that she was wrong. She tied on her apron and got out the eggs for the omelette. She measured the coffee and mixed it with cold water and eggshell.

"I think it's a shame," she burst out at length, unable to endure the silence any longer.

Mrs. Davenway, stirring the oatmeal, hesitated a moment. "We may as well not regret it," she decided gently. "It's done, and no amount of fussing could unburn those trees. We can live without 'em, same's we've been doing."

"Oh, yes, but——" Heather did not finish the sentence. She knew of course that they could live without those trees, but it seemed to her a rather weak way of dismissing disaster. Her youthful impulsiveness demanded a more violent reaction to calamity, even if one accepted it calmly in the end. She could not

imagine walking steadily along the path while blows were dealt out from each side. That sort of meekness was out of date, Puritanic, inconsistent with the modern conception of legitimate rights.

She wondered what her mother believed had been the cause of the fire, but something inhibited the question. She was sure they would not agree in their theories, and the origin was beside the point now. She forced her thoughts away from the subject.

As the day advanced, Heather was increasingly restless and irritated. It was a strain to sit opposite Booth Ransome at meals and pretend an easy casualness while her heart was hot with suspicion. When his sharp glance sought her out now and then in an obvious speculation, it taxed her will power not to flash back a message of scorn and antagonism.

The work dragged. It was constantly interrupted by neighbors and friends, who came to offer sympathy and to gather in details. In the forenoon they drifted into the kitchen. Heather, coming downstairs for the dustpan, found Mrs. Spinkett sitting by the table and Minty Pickering leaning against the sink, lavishly condoling but also effectually blocking Mrs. Davenway's intention of sweeping the floor.

Suddenly Heather felt that she didn't want to hear that fire mentioned again; she had had enough of it. She began to understand why her mother had dismissed the subject earlier in the day, but it had taken her several hours to reach the same viewpoint. And she confessed somewhat ruefully that her emotional fluctuations were stormy ones. Even now she felt as turbulent in her demand for silence as she had previously felt in her demand for expression. Mrs. Dav-

enway, on the contrary, had ignored the disaster calmly, and now she was just as calmly discussing it. Heather wondered fleetingly if her mother had more poise.

In the afternoon, callers straggled up to the side porch and penetrated the sitting-room. An observer might have thought a tea was in progress. When Heather went out to get a pint of cream from the milk-cart, she met Mrs. Bigelow, who charged her with flattering effusiveness: "Do tell your mother how sorry we all are."

"Isn't it nice of everybody to care?" said Mrs. Davenway, when Heather repeated the words.

"Yes, but why don't they talk about something else part of the time? They're making it more vivid every minute."

"Why, Heather, it's the fire they're sorry about, and they have to say so, don't they?"

"I'm cross," thought Heather. "But I don't want to think about that fire all the time, and how can I help it when the house echoes with nothing else?"

She knew that these people were sympathetic. Their kindly interest was patently genuine; but so, unfortunately, was their dramatic appreciation of every gloomy detail. They wanted to know exactly how great Mrs. Davenway considered the loss. When it was reported that Jonathan Hydackett's estimate was two hundred dollars higher than Mrs. Davenway's, their eyes gleamed with heightened alertness. The greater the loss, the bigger the news and the more important the occurrence.

Heather had the table laid for supper before her mother recalled that Miss Leathers was coming to-

night. She had to take everything off and put in an extra leaf, by no means cheered to know that the "mealers" were to be increased in number. Their presence was a severe trial to Heather. Every time she saw them filing in, she was reminded of the heterogeneity of the county fair or a benefit festival. She felt dispossessed of her home while they sat around the table. Worst of all, she was beginning to know exactly what they would talk about. They would begin by rallying Lote Joselyn on his philandering.

And they did. It gave them something to giggle about; it gratified Lote. How could they do better?

"Many's the fair heart left a-bleeding," poetically offered Mrs. Giddings, spearing pickled cabbage out of the pink vinegar, colored with raspberries.

"Now, now!" Mr. Joselyn waved them down with a pudgy hand; then reached for a biscuit. "Ain't a word of truth in it. You're just tryin' to embarrass——"

He was going to finish with his standard claim of being "a young feller," too inexperienced to take these pleasantries with poise, but the sentence hung unexpectedly in the air. The lines in his flabby face, a moment ago curving upward in segments of flattered delight, jerked down in apprehension. The biscuit wavered in his aimless hand and fell over the edge of his plate. A long jagged crack had shivered down through his serenity.

And all because Miss Cula Clare Leathers had opened the door and was fluttering into a seat opposite him. The embarrassment to which Mr. Joselyn playfully pretended, had become a reality, but he could not have told why.

He had a premonition of danger. His small bright eyes, sunk in loose folds of skin, like buttons in the hearts of rosettes, accused Mrs. Davenway of ulterior plans; and when she merely passed him a cup of tea with an innocent smile, his glance darted up and down the table as if seeking the traitor in the midst. When no mealer showed any sign of complicity, his perturbation increased. He feared the campaign that moves quietly, craftily.

"Well, I must say, Culie," began Mrs. Giddings majestically, "it is a protuberant surprise to see you here."

Miss Leathers's confusion was pathetic. Her delicate face flushed; her hand trembled as she helped herself to cold tongue. "I—I thought it would be pleasant," she stammered. "It—it looks pleasanter than to eat alone."

"Yes, I guess," agreed Mrs. Pickering acridly. "You'll eat more—for several reasons."

There was an awkward hush around the table, broken in a moment by frantic proffers of food from one to another.

Heather was offended by Miss Leathers's presence, with the supposed purpose behind it, and yet she was sorry for the small, shy woman in the impossible clothes. No woman could wear as many ruffles as that without looking like a Buff Cochin, and Miss Leathers's gray hair was as plain as her dress was elaborate. She spoke rarely to Zelotes; but whenever she glanced his way, there was a self-consciousness in her expression that revealed more than she intended. As for Zelotes, he watched her with a wary eye, as the dog watches

the incomprehensible bug that crosses the path in front of him.

Heather did not realize that she was staring at the pantomime until she caught Wylie Chamberlain's amused glance. It was a glance that shared with her a light ridicule of Miss Leathers. Heather was annoyed, both because she had betrayed her thoughts and because she felt a sudden protective sympathy for Cula Clare.

It did not last, however. Before the dish-washing was well under way, it had evaporated entirely.

"Very soon our dining-room will be dubbed The Social Opportunity, mother. I don't like it. My goodness, why didn't Miss Leathers marry when she was young?"

"Well," said Mrs. Davenway judicially, "I don't think Cula cares much about men—or ever did."

"What!"

"No," continued Mrs. Davenway, briskly washing silver, "Cula, she kinda passed 'em up when they were offered in review. Ratty Dingwall fair made a fool of himself about her."

"Oh, Ratty Dingwall!" Heather jabbed the meat fork thoughtfully into the towel and dismissed Mr. Dingwall from eligibility.

Mrs. Davenway laughed. "That's what Cula thought at the time. Made a lot of talk—her snubbing him so hard. 'Phelia Dingwall's more or less jealous of her yet. They used to be real good friends when they were young girls."

"Why, she ought to be grateful, mother, if she cares for her Ratty. If Miss Leathers had taken him, she

couldn't have had him. She ought to fall on Miss Leathers's neck in appreciation."

"That isn't the way 'Phelia figures. She's second choice, and she'll never forget it. She kinda takes it out on Cula."

"Oh sweet little town of Hampton Valley!" chanted Heather, gathering up the teaspoons.

"Ratty wasn't the only one that shined up to Cula," resumed Mrs. Davenway, doing full justice to her friend. "She was a pretty girl, and she had her share of attention. But the idea of marrying didn't appeal to her till she found she was considered an old maid. Does kinda cut her off."

"Cut her off! From what?"

"Oh—different things. She's sort of branded as being unattractive—well, you see how 'tis."

"But I don't—not so long as she made her choice. If she had various chances to marry, didn't that prove her attractive?"

"It proved it at the time, yes, but way Hampton figures—— Well, it's like a man that joins a lodge. 'Tain't enough for him to be accepted. He wears a pin or a badge or something, so's to remind folks all the time that he's a member."

Heather considered this. "So what Miss Leathers wants is a badge. Well, dear me, poor thing! Mother, let's get her one. How old is she?"

"Thirty-four."

"Good gracious, mother, do you mean to tell me that faded, scared little woman isn't more than thirty-four?"

"Only a few months more. I believe her birthday is in April. Her hair is prematurely gray, you know."

Heather's hands dropped. "And Hampton thinks she's hopeless! Must be something besides—— Why, she isn't old at all, not in these times when——"

She stopped, recalling suddenly that this was the same town in which Grandma Davenway's mother had put on a cap at thirty-five, as marking her graduation into the ranks of the elderly. The cap is no longer required, but the judgment that accompanied it has been handed down and has been scarcely modified by the less rigid views of other sections. Thirty-five was the half-way point in man's alloted span of three-score years and ten, which Hampton Valley still holds as the literal limit of normal life. Many a citizen lives beyond it; but the minute he passes the line, the town comments on the achievement, congratulates him on "being so brisk for one of his years," and thereafter taps off his birthdays with felicitations not untinged with surprise.

As Mrs. Davenway went on with her explanation, Heather was obliged to reconstruct her view of Miss Leathers. It seemed that Cula Clare had no real pleasure in the society of women, among whom she was referred to as "an old maid" in a tone of heavy disrespect. Her opinions usually met with the remark: "What does an old maid know 'bout it, anyhow?" Not only were these characterizations liberally used in her absence, but almost as liberally addressed to her in person.

As for men—— Every married man was barred from Cula's society by a watchful wife, who stood ready to accuse Miss Leathers of "bein' so desperate she tries to flirt with ev'rybody." No widower or single man would dare favor her with more than a formal

salutation. If he stopped for a moment's chat in her front yard, all Hampton would ask him if it was true he had serious intentions, and all Hampton would simultaneously reproach Miss Leathers for "settin' her cap for him." Cula, being naturally of a social disposition, felt these things keenly and under them had grown more and more timid and retiring and unhappy. Since the death of her mother, two years before, she had been virtually isolated in the midst of her own community.

"Well, I must say," cried Heather at length, "if I were in her place and a mere man would save me from all those slights, I'd have one. At the point of the gun, if necessary! He should not escape me." She waved a teacup through the air with a dramatic flourish of defiance.

Her mother gave her a sly smile. "Then I should think Cula's methods would seem to you mild."

"They do, now—mild and ineffectual. Too much choppiness of the waves, and too little undercurrent. She'd get quicker results with a calm surface and a steady pull underneath. She isn't clever."

"No," admitted Mrs. Davenway, "Cula ain't clever —with men."

Pondering these matters while she polished the tea plates, Heather was struck with an inspired thought.

"Mother, do you honestly think she'd be happy with Mr. Joselyn?"

Mrs. Davenway hesitated while she emptied the dishpan and refilled it with hot water. "I'd hate to guarantee anything as uncertain as matrimony, but I believe she'd be happier with him than without him. That's as much as any woman can expect when she's got a limited choice."

"Very well, mother, she shall have him."

Mrs. Davenway smiled. "That's very generous of you, Heather. How are you going to manage it?"

Heather set the plates away with a skillful clatter. "I haven't worked out the details, but they ought to be simple. Listen! If I could make Mr. Joselyn believe he couldn't get her, and make her act as if she didn't want him, I'd have it, wouldn't I?"

Mrs. Davenway looked at her thoughtfully. "Yes, I believe you would."

"Ah, ha!" cried Heather, flourishing her dish-towel. "I'm on the road to victory. Difficulties surround me. Stout heart, defend me! Cupid, attend me!" She executed an interpretative dance around the kitchen, ending with a low salaam which acknowledged the plaudits of ultimate triumph.

Mrs. Davenway followed her with amused eyes. "Where did you get your nonsense, Heather?"

"From my mother. You don't think I inherited it from Hampton, do you? There was no nonsense in the Davenway family till you brought it in from across the lake." The sauciness died out of her face. "Truly you make me sorry for that scared little creature, but I wonder if you aren't wrong about the whole thing, after all. It seems as if it must be her fault that she's cut off, because there's Miss Nancy Hobart, you know. She's as much an old maid as Miss Leathers—more so. She must be twenty years older. And I'm sure nobody snubs her."

"Oh, of course not," exclaimed Mrs. Davenway. "Why, they couldn't snub Miss Hobart. She's in everything that's going."

"And I'll warrant they don't call her an old maid," persisted Heather.

"No-o. Not often, anyway," agreed her mother. "Never to her face, I'm sure. They wouldn't insult her by doing it. But it isn't the same at all with Cula, Heather; you ought to know that. Miss Hobart's got money, and that makes it different—absolutely different."

"Oh!" Heather's eyes widened as light dawned on the subject.

In the next few days she observed more closely, to see just what difference money did make in Hampton Valley. Her conclusion was swiftly reached and undoubtedly correct. Money was given its proper place, but not exalted. It was used for the purpose of buying house paint and coal, food and raiment; but these things are only the decencies of life, so it was wholly commendable that each citizen should try to be as decent as he could, and wholly legitimate also that his standing in the community should be gauged by the quantity of decency which he was able to acquire by purchase.

Judge Truman Weatherwax, for instance, was able to acquire a great deal of it. He lived in a large cream-colored house with amber trimmings, set in wide lawns that were like green velvet in summer and like white velvet in winter; he was a liberal provider and jerked no check rein over Mrs. Truman in the matter of dress; he sent his son and daughter away to school, and whenever the calendar opened far enough to disclose the slightest vacation he motored right down to the school and returned with young Mr. Thomas Weatherwax and the younger Miss Polly Weatherwax, who

would spend a few days with their parents in their pleasant home on Black Cherry Avenue. For all these evidences of latitude and good taste, Judge Truman Weatherwax and his family were held in the high esteem of all.

There were other families of similar status, like the Bigelows and the Hobarts and the Judevines. And then gradually one came down. There were families, like the Hydacketts and the Zeke Gilmans and the Thomas Ray Malvins, that lived in less luxury but "kept up a brave front." There were families, like the Sam Hillocks and the Arad Plummers, that shut off part of the house in cold weather and bought a cheap car only by wearing last year's suits and patching the roof instead of "new-shingling." There were others, like the Lem Tripes and the Si Hoyts, that rented their back rooms and allowed the rentee's children to play on the lawn till it was so worn that it looked like a shabby buffalo robe. And at length one descended to individuals who did odd jobs or sewed by the day, like Fanny Waters and Mrs. Enos Flumm. The aforesaid decencies of living grew fewer and fewer as one came down this line, and naturally the esteem of the community, being in direct proportion, gradually dwindled until, about the time one reached Mrs. Flumm, it disappeared altogether. But this was not the fault of Hampton Valley; it was the inevitable working out of the criterion of self-respect upon which the village was agreed. It was of course unfortunate for Mrs. Flumm, but she had made a poor marriage and could hardly have expected that this mistake would have no consequences.

Money had still another function in Hampton Valley.

It was used to soften pathways that would otherwise have been exceedingly hard. There was Mrs. Anna Edgerley, who lived in the three-story house at the end of Hobart Avenue. Where would Mrs. Anna Edgerley have been without money? She was known to have a Past in about four volumes, lavishly annotated by some of the ablest commentators in Loopville and Hampton Valley, and all four volumes had become the property of everybody by the word-of-mouth method, which had the sanction of society as far back as the Stone Age. There had been years when only to mention Mrs. Edgerley's name had been to call down at least an hour of steady whispering, because in Hampton Valley the dissemination of scandal assumed the same tone as a heavy cold, distinguished ultimately, however, by the fact that the latter ran a shorter course and was sometimes checked entirely.

When Mrs. Edgerley had first come to Hampton as a widow with two daughters, the village had held aloof for a considerable period of perplexity and meditation, and had even said harshly that it would not receive her. But it was soon evident that the Valley could not abide by this hasty judgment. It is difficult to ignore a lady who pays ten thousand dollars spot cash for a home on Hobart Avenue and who has stunning clothes, easy manners, and an air of pearly innocence, particularly if that lady possesses a library freely offered and manifestly indispensable for the preparation of papers that may be read before the Mutual Culture Club. Gradually one sister after another, strong in virtue but weak in information about science and the arts, fell for that library and concomitantly for its owner.

Then, too, Mr. Zelotes Joselyn, chancing to be "a business visitor in Broomfield," established the fact that Mrs. Edgerley's alliance with one Henry Edgerley was a matter of record in the office of the county clerk of Appleton County. Thereupon Hampton gave a sigh of relief and swung a footbridge straight from the quondam Henry Edgerley to the current moment, allowing Mrs. Edgerley to walk upon it unmolested, high above any rocky facts in the intervening years. Her daughters received the two highest stamps of Hampton's approval: they proved to be estimable young ladies, and they "married well," the latter in Hampton meaning that their husbands were good providers, adjusted their domestic dissatisfactions in tones too low for the neighbors, and did not ask for divorce. It is a touching proof of the liberality and kindliness of Hampton Valley that Mrs. Edgerley's easy means should have made all these pleasant things possible, whereas in a narrow-minded community she might have had a difficult path indeed.

Then there was the case of Mr. Andrew Hallowell, who had a chain of farms and a heavy account in the National Bank of Hampton Valley, but was known to have a Present Record, the fluctuations of which were faithfully reported by Mrs. Araminta Pickering, possessed of scouting friends in all parts of the county. Mr. Hallowell was the victim of one of those tricky cars sometimes palmed off by an unscrupulous salesman. Often even after Mr. Hallowell had told Mrs. Hallowell that he was going to Broomfield for two or three days and even after the report had been set up in the office of the Hampton Valley Itemizer, Mr. Hallowell's car would take him no farther on the way than

the first turn below the falls, when it would veer off from the Broomfield route and carry him over to Moon Hollow. But at the same time Mr. Hallowell was so strong a supporter of his church that the minister's salary could not have been raised without him; he went into the first column when a subscription was started for a new band-stand or the relief of a sick family down in the lower end of the village; and when he opened his grounds for a lawn party to raise money for a village undertaking, he furnished all the refreshments and provided music. It seemed only a just compensation that in return for these civic generosities Mr. Hallowell should receive efficient verbal protection from his own community.

There were others who tried to maintain similar personal records, but who could not make similar contributions to the elegance and enterprise of the village; wherefore they paid the price that money might have paid for them—if they had had it. There was Percy Mink, who "was not turning out well." In consequence of this characterization, vague but thrillingly abominable, the young Percy was being rapidly cut off from the possible succor of human influence. Hampton had its own isolation ward and its own way of committing offenders. More than one upright father took advantage of a tête-à-tête with his son, incident to piling up the firewood in the shed, to remark significantly: "Look-a-here, John, 'f I see you a-gallivantin' 'round any more with that there Percy Mink, I'll give you a whalin', big's y'are. So you'd better look sharp."

Lizzie Nelson was likewise in the isolation ward. She had had a life as variegated as a drawn-in rug, many of the designs closely following the pattern of Mrs. Anna

Edgerley's existence, but on a level so much lower in the earth that the sun of prosperity had never hit them at all. Lizzie Nelson lived in the very worst old cheerless house in the most cheerless end of the village. She bought her clothes at the rummage sales and her groceries at the Help Yourself Cut Rate, and she could walk the entire length of Hampton Valley, up one side and down the other, and out and back on every cross street, and never once have to bend her neck in greeting or encounter a smile that would have to be returned. Hampton saved her these muscular exertions and saw to it that she paid rather steadily for the blindness of some force that had shot her into life and given her no chance to learn to live it, and no downy cushions to soften the rough spots.

This was her misfortune, and not the fault of Hampton. If she had had a bank account, Hampton would have given her an opportunity to use it and would have incorporated her somehow into the community system of which she would then have been a contributing part. That would have been only the logical working out of Hampton Valley's high-minded and unimpeachable attitude toward money. Wealth makes life more agreeable and easier; and the more there is of it, the easier and more agreeable a citizen's existence becomes.

And that was all that Hampton cared about money.

CHAPTER XV

THE exquisite Mrs. Giddings and the phlegmatic Daphy were sitting on the front porch in moody silence. Mrs. Giddings had just finished the first round in an encounter of wills. So far it was a tie except that Mrs. Giddings was enriched by feelings that had been worked up incidentally. She was bewildered and angry. Presently, when she had replenished her breath and her fountain of words, she would be prepared to go through the final stages of martyrdom and unappreciation, culminating, if necessary, in a few choice threats that she was reserving for emergency.

As usual, the trouble was about Sid Morrow, clerk in Jeff Cooper's drug store. He had been in Hampton only a few months. In spite of the menial position for which he was fitted, he had entered the town with a flourish and had "cut a dash" ever since. His dead white skin and wavy black hair had been too much for the susceptible Daphy; the very first glance from his dark eyes had snared her in a happy infatuation. It had been only a matter of days before the village was whispering: "That there new clerk at Jeff Cooper's is a-keepin' comp'ny with Daphy Giddings. Guess it didn't take him long to learn 'bout her ma's havin' means."

Not only did Mrs. Giddings hear these suspicions,

but she believed them and acted accordingly. Daphne Isabel was finding that the path of an heiress was set with thorns. So far from having greater liberty of choice in this personal affair of matrimony, she was hedged about with ambitions which had been whetted by her mother's legacy.

"If you think for a minute that I'll have that Sid feller for a son-in-law," Mrs. Giddings was beginning on the second round, when Heather came out of the house in a costume that temporarily deflected the trend of conversation.

"My stars and body, Heather!" Mrs. Giddings gasped. "What a lotta clo'es you do attire yourself in! Daphy's got a white wool skirt with lines of dark red in it, too, but a mite closer mebbe. If she only had a silk jacket to go with it! What color is yours? Marooned, ain't it?"

"Mahogany," corrected Heather, smiling.

Mrs. Giddings nodded. "Same thing." Her gaze swept Daphne's rosebud voile with sudden dissatisfaction. "Only thing I don't like 'bout Hampton is, it's so far from the marts of trade. Of course Styggles & Company are all right for 'most folks here, but hardly for us. Still, I'm living in Hampton 'cause I choose to. Land knows there ain't no city in this here country too expensive for me to live in if I found it nearer heart's desire. Reason I stay in Hampton is 'cause I got reasons."

"Yes, I think everybody understands," twinkled Heather.

"They'd oughter," agreed Mrs. Giddings pompously. "I'm uncompromisingly contented with Hampton Valley so long's I got a mother's duty to persecute. It's

unspeakably respectable. And mothers that want to bring up offspring free from guile can't do better'n to bury umselves in Hampton in the interests of youth." Mrs. Giddings paused a moment to enjoy the pleasing inflation of this high sentiment; then proceeded with her lost thread. "But as far's keeping stylish goes, we're at the disadvantage of all rural precincts. Daphy, dear," she purred, with an affectionate look, "we really must hie ourselves to Broomfield and ruminate among the shops. We owe it to our appearances. It makes a hard day, but we have a duty."

"Me for Broomfield!" drawled Daphy, fixing the resolution while she had a witness. "Your kind invitation is accepted with thanks. Say, Heather, you waiting for somebody?"

For no definite reason, Heather was annoyed. The casual words, freighted with heavy significance, and the knowing look that accompanied them, made her uncomfortably self-conscious.

"Yes," she said carelessly. "Wylie's going over to Moon Hollow, and he asked me to go, too. It's a beautiful afternoon."

"Ain't it!" confirmed Daphy, with unusual vehemence. "But if it rained ducks and tree toads, I'll bet you'd go just the same."

"No, I shouldn't," laughed Heather. "It would ruin my hat." She adjusted more firmly the white straw faced with mahogany satin, and drew on her gloves.

"Huh!" scoffed Daphy. "It'd be one hat lost in a good cause. Well, I don't blame you that you're looking out for real Jersey butter for your daily bread. Gosh, no. I hand it to you for being a nifty planner, all right."

The color rose in Heather's cheeks, but Wylie's arrival cut off the necessity of a reply.

Mrs. Giddings and Daphne lost no detail of Wylie's greeting, his expression, his manner. When the new roadster had swung out of Checker Street, they looked at each other in a mute comparison of impressions.

"He seems—seems very——" began Mrs. Giddings with delicacy.

"Yeh, he is," mumbled Daphy, slumping deeper into her chair. "Dead gone on her! And Clif Stanleigh eating his heart out, too! Gee, she's the original lucky kid!"

"Clif Stanleigh? Is he——"

"*Is* he!" intoned Daphy scornfully. "Is he? You'd have to be as blind as a meadow mole not to see it. Myself, I like 'em that's got more spunk and puts up a better fight; but gee, it's easy seen how he feels. And I'd like you to notice that nobody's meddling with Heather, either. Her mother's got more——"

This was the signal for Mrs. Giddings.

"How sharper than an adder's tongue!" she characterized, in a voice shaken by the double agency of anger and self-pity. "What it is to have an ungrateful child!"

"Yeh!" mocked Daphy. "But it's the child that does the suffering, all right. Believe me! Here Heather can have all the beaux she can scare up, and nobody interferes, but me—I ain't trying to manage only one, and look what I get!"

"There, you put your finger right on it, Daphne Isabel Giddings. You hain't got but one, and he's the wrong one."

"He's as good as you could expect," flared Daphy,

sitting up very straight. "We aren't much, when you come right down to it, and 'tain't likely that anybody higher'n Sid would ever look at me."

"Sid ain't nowise suitable for you," countered her mother, who had now reached the stage of cold fury. "I'd have you remember that your mother's got money, and every dollar carries a responsibility."

"Gee whizz, ma," cried Daphy, springing up and confronting Mrs. Giddings with flashing eyes and flushed cheeks. "Look them dollars in the face once, and you'll find they've got the sign of liberty on 'em. Guess that means somep'n in this country."

"Guess it don't mean what you think," retorted Mrs. Giddings. "Just you try it out if you dare. Mark my words, Daphne Isabel: If you don't drop that Sid Morrow, I'll put a spoke in your wheel that you'll take notice to."

"Huh! Well, you mark *my* words, Mrs. Tuft Giddings," snapped her daughter. "If you keep on thorning me, I'll make you sorry. You can bet the very last one of your blamed old dollars on that. And as for spokes, you're the one that's got the wheels they could be put in." She jammed on her hat and switched down the steps.

"Daphy, you come back. I ain't through with you yet."

"Shut up!" cried Daphy, slamming the old picket gate.

"Oh, dear! Oh!" Mrs. Giddings wrung her hands. "Oh, I wish my attorney-at-law was here this minute." She sank back in her chair and rolled her eyes to heaven with a despairing groan. The world puzzled Mrs. Giddings.

Daphy, however, had not reached the end of Checker Street before her outer composure was restored. But a discerning gaze might have detected the traces of recent struggle, and it was Daphy's intention to call down upon herself exactly that sort of gaze. In other words, she was about to drown her grief in a glass of orange phosphate, properly fizzed by the expert skill of Sid Morrow.

In the course of the summer she had taxed Jeff Cooper's fountain to its utmost. Not that she was pursuing Sid! Daphy was far too clever to expose herself thus to the criticism of Hampton, and Sid's courtship was far too impetuous to require any prompting. But the fountain was highly popular with all the idle young ladies in the Valley, so that Daphy could merely follow the crowd and at the same time strengthen her spirit against the inroads of home rule.

She was so fortunate as to find her lover alone in the store.

"'Lo, Sid." She drooped gracefully to a round spring seat in front of the counter.

"'Lo, sweetheart. Who's been 'busing the baby?" Sid leaned over the marble counter in his most sinuous manner and gave her a look of tender solicitude.

Daphy repaid him with a dazzling smile. "Wha' makes you think?"

"Trust me! Gee, don't I know, minute things go kerflooie with my honey? Know what I'd do if 'twan't for that darn' plate-glass window."

"You tell," giggled Daphy.

"I'd kiss you, so I would."

"Aw, go 'long! Don't you get fresh with me. You're

fixing me some orange phos', silly. Act like you didn't know it, you do."

"Well, I don't, do I?"

"Yeh, o' course."

"How?"

"Telling you, ain't I?"

"Don't know. Can't hear it when you say 'phosphate.' That ain't half good enough for a sweet little Daphy-dollie-dillie. Tell you what! Have a cherry sundae on Monday. I know how to fix it when I mix it."

"Oh Sid, you do make me laff."

"Sure. Little Siddie'll dry your tears. Ma been acting up again?"

She nodded dolefully.

Sid poured a rich pink sauce over the ice cream, half smothered in cherries, set the glass dish on a plate with an embossed paper doily between, and shoved the offering before his inamorata—an offering, to be exact, from Mr. Jeff Cooper, unless that gentleman should return inopportunely.

"Wha's matter with the old lady this time, Daphy?"

"Same thing." Daphy spooned into the sundae with a light touch and returned verdict. "Sure is swell, Sid. Takes you to fix it, just's you said. Yeh, she's wild at me—'cause I don't cut you off'n the map."

"Gosh, ain't that hell?"

"Uh-huh," subscribed Daphy, becalmed by sympathy.

He leaned a little closer. "Know what I'd like to do? I'd like to take you outa all this—hanged if I wouldn't. If I had any luck——"

Daphy sighed deliciously. The cherry sundae was good, and Sid's devotion was more superb than ever.

She was so happy that it was hard to keep up the attitude of an abused daughter.

"Ain't it fierce, Sid, being nagged at alla time?"

"It's the limit. I——" He straightened suddenly, as the screen door opened. "You are quite right, Miss Giddings," he finished with tremendous dignity. "Quite right. Good afternoon, Mrs. Hoyt. Can I get something for you?"

It seemed that he could. Therefore Daphy consumed her sundae without the background of sprightly conversation. But she was cheered by the refreshment and also by the understanding and charming sympathy which had not failed her.

Feeling in no hurry to get back to Mrs. Davenway's, she strolled around the village; and as she walked slowly down Railroad Street as far as the Hampton Picture Palace, the serenity which Sid's presence had induced, was by way of being ruffled again. The street was empty; a limp banana skin was blackening in the gutter; the stores, to Daphy's suddenly critical eyes, looked low and squat and closely packed.

" 'Bout the size of squirrel cages," she pronounced disdainfully. "Gee, I wish Sid could take me outa here. It's a dead hole—rotten. You'd think to hear ma talk it was a kind of saintly paradise. I wonder if she believes all that dope. Aw, she knows better, her knowing Minty Pickering, way she does. Gee, I'll bet Hampton's as wicked as any place on earth. Ma'd oughter hear Mattie Lyman talk a while." She cast a vindictive glance at the boxy railroad station, and wheeled to go back.

Let it be swiftly said, however, that Daphy's estimate of the Valley was prompted by her own troubles.

She was biased. Hampton Valley was a quiet place—beautiful and very, very quiet. Mrs. Giddings was entirely correct in believing that it was different from a city—more peaceful, freer from boldness and crudity.

There was none of the shamelessness of cities about Hampton, none of the vice that stalks abroad naked and unashamed. Hampton would have been shocked. It had rigid ideas about conduct, particularly about that part of conduct which should become public property. Its attitude was to protect the public from knowing too much.

From eight in the morning till eight at night, Hampton would look you straight in the eye and declare the unimpeachable uprightness of all its citizens, a judgment based comfortably upon the simple premise that those citizens lived in the dandy little town of Hampton Valley.

At nine o'clock in the evening half the population was snugly tucked away till morning—the older generations between featherbeds and patchwork quilts; the younger, between floss and down. At ten the final decorous light winked out. Of course there were occasional cases of insomnia after that hour, as might happen anywhere; but with that fine sympathy that was characteristic of Hampton, the sleepless ones formed into groups and bore their infirmity as well as they could, modestly, self-effacingly, in back rooms and rooms upstairs. Like the heroic Spartans, they kept their troubles to themselves. But now and then somebody found out about them—like Mrs. Araminta Pickering, who, having no telephone, was forced to clip down Hill Street one night to rout out a doctor for one of her suffering neighbors. As she passed the

rear of Bill Capron's furniture store, a voice smote her ears, saying: "I'll straddle your blind, you old cutthroat, you."

It was the voice, Mrs. Pickering declared, of Sam Goldthwaite, whose nightly whereabouts had been up for discussion for some time in Minty's circle. She spread the news rather liberally, partly because it solved a mooted question, and partly because "it was all a furrin language" to her and she craved from the more sophisticated a translation that could be incorporated into her own vocabulary of virtue.

If perchance a discontented wisdom tooth wakened you in the smaller hours of the morning and you heard furtive footsteps padding past the house, your status could be determined by what you did. If you were a visitor, you lifted both ears and wondered; but if you were a good Hamptonite, you filled your own hot-water bottle and soothed your own tooth and paid no attention to footsteps. Minty Pickering might tell you whose they were and that they were being guided by a thoroughly conscious mind toward Ben Hatton's barn, never so busy a place in the heyday of the horse as now in the sad day of thirst. Ben, being clever in importation and distribution, was naturally using his talents, but why should that disturb you? What really disturbed you was the wisdom tooth, and Hampton would advise you to avoid further worry by having it extracted—Dr. Ferd Parks, D.D.S., Lower Main Street, Painless Methods or Gas, Rates Reasonable.

There was a time when various wives looked with disfavor upon the Men's Recreation Club, but eventually they discovered their mistake. It was Mrs. Erastus Dingwall who precipitated this joyous relief.

"My good gracious!" she had flung out one evening when the perspiring Ratty was trying to hook on a fresh collar with a thumb nail cut too short. "My good gracious, I'd like to know what 'tis in that club that you men are so crazy about."

"Oh, you would, would you?" taunted Ratty, puckering his face into a rosette of frenzied effort and pressing mightily on the stubborn buttonhole. Refusing to open, it suddenly split to the edge of the collar, and the button jabbed Ratty's thumb to the quick. With a howl of exasperation and pain, he wheeled and glared savagely at the wife of his bosom and the mother of his sons. It was a look that the loyal Ophelia omitted from her club paper on "The Home as a Factor in Civic Life."

"Gosh darn it, what's got into you, anyhow?" he stormed, for by this time he thought she was to blame for the collar, too. "What do you women mean, bein' so all-fired suspicious? What do you s'pose that club is for, say?"

"I—that's what I wanted to know," whimpered Ophelia with the fight mostly gone out of her, after the way of a dutiful and well-trained wife.

Ratty, with the broken collar flapping loose on one side of his neck, gave her his full attention. "Well, good land o' Moses, has a man gotta be watched all the time? Devver occur to you that men like to talk by umselves now and then? I s'pose it's your idear that we'd oughter set 'round home and poor the cat and play sol'taire." He flipped the collar loose from the back button and was simultaneously struck with an inspiration.

"You wanter know, do you? All right, we'll show

you what we do at the club. That's what we'll do. Gosh ding it, we'll show you."

And they did. A few weeks later the club gave a Ladies' Night. Wives and sweethearts and females were invited with cordial expansiveness. They all went; they all saw everything and were at once relieved and disappointed. They had not dreamed that men could be so easily entertained.

The feature of the main room was a long table with a surprising number of legs, but apparently it occurred to no one that card tables crowded together would give this unusual effect. The top was thickly strewn with newspapers and magazines—the latter not unlike the display on a rack in Jeff Cooper's drug store, although Jeff's magazines were all in place by ten o'clock the next morning. The most conspicuous picture was a crayon enlargement of the late Tobias Summerworth, who had been known as an ardent advocate of spring water to quench every thirst.

It was Mrs. Ham Spinkett who gave the entertainers their cue. "We hope you'll do just what you would if us ladies wasn't here," she coyly informed half a dozen men standing near her. "Just what you do every evenin', you know!"

They said Oh, yes, that was a good idea. Thereupon each of the six men sat down, lighted a cigarette or a cigar, threw one leg over the other, and lolled his head against the chair-back in the manner of one absolutely at ease, physically and mentally. Ignoring Mrs. Spinkett, they addressed to one another leading remarks about various matters of town news and about magazine articles based upon such cover announcements as could be seen from their respective positions.

Mrs. Spinkett was delighted. The only question left in her system was about "this here pool table I seen in the other room." Even in that they humored her, inducting her through a game, that she might see for herself.

It was a handsome entertainment, with a great deal of music and with refreshments from the restaurant; and it was a good lesson to the women of Hampton Valley. After that, every wife knew that the club was the safest place she could possibly send her husband for a quiet evening. Often, too, husband showed his appreciation of the softened attitude by proffering a hundred dollars the next morning "for spending money if you want it. Better run down to Broomfield and buy some flub-dubs for yourself and the kids." That is, some husbands did this, and some didn't. It all depended!

CHAPTER XVI

THROUGH the columns of that progressive sheet, the Hampton Valley Itemizer, Mrs. Davenway had informed the town of her willingness to sell her home on Checker Street, but so far the advertisement had brought no customers. It had, however, brought results, as becomes all good advertisements in all progressive sheets. A number of Hamptonites had forthwith trailed through Mrs. Davenway's house, on the slender preamble that they "might hear of somebody," or that "it might do some good to write 'bout it to my cousin in Loopville, 'cause she knows ev'rybody, and you never can tell."

Astonishingly enough, Mrs. Araminta Pickering was one of the first to ask if she might "go through,"—a flattering attention, because Minty was a busy woman as General Supervisor of all Hampton; and her interest was also altruistic, since she owned a two-story house which the late Silas Pickering had been constrained to leave to her exclusive use or disposal. Mrs. Pickering explained that she was going to help Mrs. Davenway by "tellin' everybody," an intention which nobody could question. Incidentally she assured herself that the front chamber was two feet narrower than her own, that the entire upper floor needed going over, that the garret was full of nobody knew what, and that Heather Davenway had a monogram on her toilet arti-

cles and kept shoe trees in her slippers—while her mother all the time took boarders! She did not insult the deductive powers of her audience by indicating how the removal of the monogram—or even of the shoe trees—would have speeded up Mrs. Davenway's kitchen work; nor did she include the palliating circumstance that at the time of her observations upstairs, the object of her criticism, Heather Davenway, was menially sweeping the dining-room and wiping off the linoleum by a method that was thoroughly anti-manicure.

"We're keeping open house; that's about all it amounts to," commented Heather ruefully, as her mother came back from conducting one of the inspections, to find that in her absence the spice cake had baked too hard on the edges. "We might give a reception and have it over in one evening. But as for selling, we'll have to advertise somewhere else."

Mrs. Davenway hesitated over her reply; but when she spoke, her voice was cool and firm. "All right; we'll advertise in a few papers outside. Come fall, though, there may be new folks in Hampton that'll want homes. We're going to have a new school principal, and it's said that a man from Frear's Crossing may come here to open a new garage."

Heather's smile acknowledged the crowded nature of the avenues which fed Hampton Valley with new inhabitants.

"We wasted money putting that notice in the Itemizer," she laughed. "Casually mentioning our wishes to Mrs. Pickering would have sent the news over the Valley like charges of buckshot, and all sympathetic citizens would have answered the call to find out how

our house is planned and whether we keep it cleaned or not."

Mrs. Davenway looked at her with troubled eyes. "I'm sorry, dear, that you've grown so critical. A body'd think, to hear you talk, that Hamptonites were a race of beings by themselves and——"

"Certainly they're differentiated," broke in Heather quickly, bringing out a platter for the spice cake, which her mother had been trimming. "In many ways they look to me odd after——"

Mrs. Davenway interrupted in her turn. "Of course they do, but don't you know why? It's because you're looking at them at close range—fairly under a microscope. If you were to look at your own fingers under a microscope, you'd declare they were the strangest fingers you ever saw. If you picked out a mixed group of your Western people or your New York people and watched them as closely as you're watching Hampton, you'd discover a lot of traits that you hadn't thought much about before."

"Maybe I should," acknowledged Heather slowly, as she set the spice cake on the pantry shelf. "I know there's a certain humanity that is common to every section, mother, if that's what you mean; but it doesn't reach its most normal stage in a place like this. Why, in Hampton the population scarcely changes. There's no inwash of other influences to be combated or partially accepted; there's no especial clash of racial or sectional viewpoints to result in keeping the median perspective. There's no check on over-development of some traits, and no factor to prevent under-development of others. As near as I can make out, whatever qualities Hampton Valley had to begin with, it still

has—some of them almost run out; some of them gone to seed; and a few of them keeping normal simply because the impulse toward normality is the strongest one in human life."

"My gracious, Heather, is Hampton Valley worrying you like that?"

Heather turned away abruptly. "I've thought about it a good deal," she said, with an obvious evasion that astonished her mother. Mrs. Davenway wondered if Heather were attempting to reconcile herself to the thought of living here with her, instead of going back to the city. No! In that case, she would show some wavering about the sale of the house.

But the fact was that Heather was wavering about it, although so far only in her own mind. There were uncomfortable moments when she questioned her right to pry her mother out of an environment to which she was attached and which held all the friends of her maturity. There were moments, also, when she lost her thoroughgoing aversion to small-town atmosphere and asked herself if it were not as favorable to the existence of an individual as any other atmosphere. The community was background, after all, and perhaps she had been giving it a primal importance that was really a transposal of values. It was a background totally different from the city and with the emphasis on different elements, but the average might be similar. At least, for some people.

She was finding that her vague distaste for village life, fed on the recollections of her childhood, was being transmuted into a more rationalized estimate; and although this was largely disapproving, it was unexpectedly punctuated with admiration here and there.

She had been sure of the pettiness of Hampton Valley, of its constrictions; she had resented its gratuitous supervisions, its common knowledge of everything and everybody's affairs; but gradually she had realized that if Hampton was narrower in some ways than larger communities which she had exalted, it was undeniably broader in others. This was disconcerting. She was going through the dismay of all very young persons who have decided that the world is entirely black and white, and then find areas of gray or of mottled effects where the two have been shaded or modified by vivid pigmentation until they have passed beyond the possibility of any glib analysis.

There was, for instance, the most ready and open-handed generosity in Hampton, both with money and service. If there was sickness and no nurse to be had, the women of Hampton took immediate charge, not only caring for the patient but for the patient's family and house. If a garden yielded more than the family required, a conscientious canvassing ensued to find somebody who could use more tomatoes or sweet corn or cucumbers. It was New England thrift infused with unselfish concern.

Also, Hampton Valley felt an instant and personal responsibility for the poor in its midst. There were men who regularly and unobtrusively sent coal and wood and groceries to the poor families in the lower end of the village and up under the mountain—families that would otherwise not be able to pull through the long, hard, cold winters. If a sudden case of need developed, the Hamptonites didn't say it was too bad and they had better appoint a committee. No; they got in and did things themselves, at once. They sewed;

they gave materials; they gave money; they gave time. Their own affairs, their own convenience, canceled out of their thoughts altogether; they gave freely of their resources and of themselves, and took no credit. There was little long-handled charity in Hampton, but a great deal more of personal service than the larger community can boast.

Mrs. Davenway's friends came for afternoon calls—Mrs. Cooper, Mrs. Styggles, Mrs. Gilman, and a score of others. They rocked comfortably in the sitting-room or on the side porch and talked of any chance thing that rose effortlessly to the surface of their minds: a new blouse pattern, whether a street would be cut between Black Cherry Avenue and Elmwood, the best remedy for striped-bugs, how to make cold-water cake. Heather, sitting by with her own work, felt the inconsequence of the words and the very real warmth and friendliness that underlay them, the most precious distillation of human intercourse. These were the quiet, happy moments in her mother's life, her rest from the strenuous hours that preceded, her fortification against strenuous hours to come.

And yet she, Heather, proposed to tear her away from this refuge that had been hers for a quarter of a century. And what would she offer instead? Why, concerts and lectures and art exhibitions and pageants, beautiful buildings and beautiful rooms, harmonies of space and color, variety, continual distraction. She was surprised to find doubt creeping in. Were these things as vital as they had seemed when she had been directly under their spell? Were they not, after all, as much surface experiences as Mrs. Cooper's encounters with striped-bugs—more diverting, but just

as extraneous? Probably they were, unless they roused something in the individual that persisted and developed and deepened after the incidents themselves were past—which might happen. And might not.

Even if it did, weren't these effects cold and immaterial? *Divertissement!* Unquestionably for the average participant these experiences were exactly that and nothing more, and she had no reason to believe that they would enter into her mother's life in any real sense. How could they, when Mrs. Davenway's interests were domestic and simple, opposed to the æsthetic in those clever and glittering habiliments which make their appeal only after training and association? There would be new friends, of course, but what about the lonely months before acquaintances would undergo that evolution into the familiar and trustworthy?

And would the new people ever fill the place of these pleasant women who came in without knocking and sat in chairs without being invited and talked about eggs and housegowns and gardens and school taxes, and all the time meant something deeper and different; who spoke of trifles and knew them for the flying pennants that catch the breeze; who chattered but concomitantly employed that silent language in which is expressed the most precious social factor—warm and dependable friendship?

But these uncomfortable doubts were transitory. Heather forgot them completely in the serene and happy hours which Hampton was offering her with greater frequency, now that her intention of remaining several months had become generally known.

With Wylie Chamberlain she sometimes walked up to Fanning Heights after supper; and they paused

under a straight young tamarack to watch the sun, a huge, molten ball, grow larger every second as it slipped nearer the dark-blue ridge of Mt. Echo. They looked down on the village, so lost in the maples and elms that it was a mere patch of delicate foliage pierced by thin church spires, scarcely a house visible except on the nearer streets. Beyond was a section of the Spinooski, crimson under the last reckless rays of the sun. And all around the Valley were the intersecting spurs of the Green Mountains, as soft and redundant as the ruffles of a ballet skirt. The voices of the day were stilled. A sleepy bird called from a tree above them; over in Nelly's Pond the frogs were tuning their vocal cords for the evening overture. This was peace and beauty. This was seclusion from needless turmoil, a dream of fairyland come true.

Or on a warm afternoon Delight Bigelow drove around with her car already crowded with girls—Polly Weatherwax and Minerva Hobart and Bessie Elliot and Kitty Judevine—and they urged Heather to put on her hat quick, because there was plenty of room. They settled themselves into smaller compass with the faint rustling of fastidious birds; and laughing and chatting—nobody waiting for anybody else to finish, or caring what she or anybody else said—they swung out of the village and took the road toward Hemlock Knob.

The rowen was thick and green in the fields. Herds of Jerseys and Holsteins were grazing among the rocks and hillocks in the frequent pastures or standing under the shady willows by the small brooks. Now and then a bobolink flashed across a meadow, flinging out a song

of joy, lighted on a bloom of goldenrod, and swayed in the maddest abandon.

Heather felt as happy as the bobolink, and wholly satisfied with her companions. They shrieked with pointless laughter; they burst into wild exclamations over nothing at all. They skipped from one subject to another: where Delight's sapphire ring came from, a recurrent speculation, provocative of blushes and convulsions of merriment; what Mrs. Dingwall said to her husband when he forgot to bring the meat and she thought nobody was listening; whether Sid Morrow curled his hair or not; why Professor Kittredge, the music teacher from Loopville, wouldn't give any more lessons to Hannah Fuller; the best way to wash crêpe de chine; the most thrilling mystery story you ever read; whether filet would wear as well as real Cluny.

Heather forgot that she had ever criticized Hampton. She floated on the general gaiety as lightly and unquestioningly as the down-tipped dandelion seed on the breeze. She came back feeling foolish and irresponsible and deliciously happy. Existence was a joyous thing, after all, and girls were girls, and life was life everywhere.

But when she had distributed the glass sauce dishes of raspberries and rung the silver bell that spread the glad tidings to boarders and mealers alike, the heady exhilaration began to subside. She had attained a manner of large tolerance for these intruders in her home, but not yet could she meet on an easy basis of conversational give-and-take.

It was with uncontrollable aversion that she watched them file in: Booth Ransome, sleek and bold; Zelotes Joselyn, stepping dapperly, a purple pansy in the but-

tonhole of his gray coat; little Miss Leathers, creeping quietly, apologetic and timid; Mrs. Araminta Pickering, prancing stiffly, her sharp glance everywhere; Mrs. Giddings and her daughter, resplendent in finery that had resulted from the shopping trip to Broomfield. Mrs. Giddings was in white with more black ribbons than ever, her broad sash dripping streamers from two knots. Daphne, in rose silk tissue veiled in smoky chiffon, looked like a section of the afterglow, very modish, very pretty, her somewhat shallow expression curiously mingled with a world-old sophistication. What a contrast to all these people Wylie Chamberlain was in his plain business suit, with no affectation of manner and no pretense! His presence redeemed the crudeness, the tawdriness, of the others.

And the conversation! Not the light badinage of the afternoon, nonsensical but nevertheless an exchange of wholesome merriment; rather, the ponderous efforts of those who intend seriousness and accomplish the inane! They talked in groups; but during capricious lulls in the general hum, divers topics shot to the surface and claimed the attention of the entire table.

"I guess she's all right now," declared Mrs. Pickering, breaking a baked potato. "I hain't heard nothin' against her for three year and a half, but of course there was a time——"

"Will somebody please pass the chow-chow?" fluttered Miss Leathers.

"No, sir-ee, Mr. Ransome," decided Lote Joselyn heavily. "You're just blowin' your breath against the wind, braggin' up your car to me. The little old Ford is good enough for anybody, and you can't hornswoggle me into thinkin' diff'runt."

Mrs. Giddings helped herself to cold ham and cast a withering glance at Mrs. Pickering. "I really wish, Minty," she intoned majestically, "that you would refrain from gossip before Daphy. I have always brought her up to be innocent of guile, and I'd like to keep her so."

The guileless Daphy rolled her blue eyes toward the top of her head and readjusted her watch with a knowing smile.

"Oh, all right, Romie," retorted Mrs. Pickering with heat. "Guess it won't be no more've a strain on me than it must be on you. My landy massy, what a shock it'd be if Daphy should happen along sometime when you're goin' on——"

"Minty!" The entire table responded with a jerk to the electric current in this remonstrance.

"Oh, well!" Mrs. Pickering subsided sulkily. In Daphy's absence the two ladies were the most congenial companions, exchanging gathered material with liberality and fairness; but there were other times when Minty was bewildered by her friend's rôle of brooding motherhood and correct counsel.

"Help yourself to the butter, won't you, Minty?" said Mrs. Davenway, with lavish hospitality. Many a verbal climax had been averted by her apposite proffer of more food. "Even if folks refuse it," Mrs. Davenway had confided to her daughter, "they can't avoid thinking about it for a minute. I don't intend to have any trouble at my table; and I've noticed that there's something about deciding whether he'll have a caraway cookie or not, that breaks up the rising tide of a fellow's feelings."

Mrs. Giddings took this attention to her friend as

indicating that she herself had scored the victory. She became expansive. "Of course any comprehensive mother has duties that the childless widow can't hardly appreciate," she declaimed, still taking it out on Minty. "Anybody who knows she that was Romilda Tuft, knows that she ain't any natural hand for gossip per such, but only to guard the pitfalls of my daughter by the knowledge that forefends." Having swaddled her thought beyond any shafts of penetration by herself or her audience, Mrs. Giddings acquired a slice of bread with extreme elegance of gesture and began again.

"Some folks are far too quick jumping at conclusions and missing 'em," she snapped, with a sweep of her eyes toward Minty.

"Do have a sweet pickle, Mrs. Giddings," urged Mrs. Davenway effusively.

Mrs. Giddings paused in her mad career, cast upon the pickles a glance of transferred malignance, and fell before the lure. She speared one of the slippery sweets and veered into the pleasant paths of self-adulation.

"A mother's duty is never done," she sighed. "Mrs. Davenway, you'll bear me up on that, I'm sure. Now that I have the means to live a life of listless indolence, it has become my bonded duty to secure as much culture as I can. Every day I pursue it. At the present I am engorging my vocabulary by learning two new words every day. Mr. Brisbee, my attorney-at-law in Loopville, said it was the best anecdote to stagnation that he knew of."

"Zip her up? You're doin' fine!" encouraged Lote Joselyn.

"Aw, cut it out, ma," advised Daphy impatiently.

"I shall not surcease," aspirated Mrs. Giddings with greater dignity. "I have the most abject confidence in my attorney-at-law. He stands very high before the bar. I'm sure I beg your pardon, Wylie; I had no thought of making an insidious comparison. While it recurs to me, I should be pleased to hear if you yourself know any better way of acquiring an exhaustive vocabulary."

"I certainly don't," returned Wylie gravely, "unless it is to learn the meaning along with the word."

Mrs. Giddings stared at him through an uncertain moment. "That is precluded, of course," she said stiffly.

Wylie's glance traveled to Heather, and their eyes brimmed with laughter that came to no other expression. But it enlivened the tedium, nevertheless. . . . Wylie's mother would be home next week. He wouldn't come in to suppers after that. Heather realized that she would feel lost among these people when Wylie was not there to send her a friendly message of understanding now and then.

And yet, although she resented the presence of the boarders, she had found unexpectedly that the close association had vastly modified some of her earlier impressions. She had never before had any liking for Daphne Giddings, considering her crude and shallow; but now that she saw her constantly, her feeling had changed. Daphne was at heart a touchingly humble person, not daring to set her expectations high; she was ashamed of her mother's pretensions and irritated out of her natural sweetness by steady home nagging. Harried and handicapped, Daphy was incessantly

floundering toward something that would lift her out of bondage and give her better opportunities—only she lacked the penetration and judgment that would have helped her to flounder in the right direction.

Her struggle, evident at close range, had roused Heather's sympathy and respect. She had softened in her attitude toward Daphy, and the two girls had become good friends—not intimate, but appreciating each other with a warm mutual admiration. Beyond friendly glances, however, they rarely had any interchange at the table, being submerged by the conversation of their elders.

Heather turned her attention to the problem of Miss Leathers and Mr. Joselyn, which she had blithely offered to solve. In vain she had been studying these two people, sitting on opposite sides of the table, scarcely speaking to each other, but most obviously never free from consciousness of each other's presence. That seemed strange. If Zelotes felt no attraction for Miss Leathers, why did he act so persistently aware——

"Ain't sick, little girl, are you? Don't seem like you're eatin' a thing." It was Mr. Joselyn who spoke —not to Cula Clare, as would have been fitting, but to Heather.

She started violently. The blood rushed into her face in an angry tumult. What did he mean—calling her "little girl" in that solicitous tone that made all these people look up and exchange glances? Heather was aghast.

"Aa-ha!" breathed Minty Pickering comprehendingly.

"How protecting!" chimed in her friend Romie.

Heather presently managed an impersonal manner

and a smile as cool as sunshine on snow. "I'm splendidly well, thank you—only waiting till somebody passes the custard pie."

But her eyes continued to be stormy. When the supper work was in progress in the domestic haven of the kitchen, her mother's troubled scrutiny sought her out again and again. Finally she spoke.

"Heather, best way I see is—— Well, if you'd just kinda snub him a little—gently, you know—— Don't you think it would be better than letting it go any further?"

"Mother! It's not possible."

Mrs. Davenway laughed somewhat grimly. "Lote is Lote; there's no getting away from that. Minty's been talking about this for a week. Dear child, don't look so—as if you were taking bitters."

Heather made no immediate reply, but her lips were twisted in disgust and her dark eyes looked black. She was feeling the physical revulsion of youth for the middle-age that yearns for romance—the middle-age that has rubbed off the bloom and grown callous to the thrills and has cast aside the iridescent veil, and now stalks romance in the open, with firm step and keen eye and weapons poised.

"I've been studying him as I would a beetle," she observed at last. "Can he think I've been admiring ——" She broke off with a wide gesture of amazement and without committing herself to any definite intention, but she stacked the tea plates with a verve and finality that were in themselves a promise of future effectiveness.

There was silence for several minutes except for the clinking of dishes and silver. Then Mrs. Davenway

drew a long breath and broached another subject, firmly and yet with reluctance.

"Mr. Ransome has explained why he wanted that land—for summer cottages. 'Tain't worth so much to him now that the fire has destroyed the trees, but he thinks he could clear it and put out a new growth that would be a pretty setting. He can't offer as much, of course, but he'll give a thousand. Unless you object, Heather, I'm going to take it. He'll pay half of it next week, and the rest of it in thirty days. It will make us freer to leave Hampton."

Heather dropped the cooking spoons into the drawer and paused, her thoughts moving swiftly. Booth Ransome had set that fire; she felt sure of it. But what could she do about it? The water power was valuable —or would be if anybody wanted it, but in the last fifty years nobody had. And what could she do about that, either? She couldn't move the falls nearer Broomfield or draw enterprises away from that or some other commercial center.

She had opposed the sale before, but her judgment had not been justified by the results. Besides, her mother had given in to her wishes in the larger matter of selling the house and leaving Hampton. It rather entitled her to do as she pleased in this particular, especially as the land belonged to her, anyhow.

"Do you care, dear?" Mrs. Davenway persisted.

"No," Heather returned faintly.

From the vase that had adorned the supper table she took the verbenas and double petunias and went out to the back yard to lay them on the grass, that they might be revived by the dew, according to the approved custom of the older Hampton. The cool

dampness of evening was settling over the garden. The afterglow had faded, and the western sky was a pale turquoise, against which the full-foliaged trees were dark masses. The crickets were chirping around the steps. In a few moments it would be night. It was the time when the relentless inevitability of natural law was most evident, and it struck Heather this evening with a poignant gloom that was partly a result of her inner rebellion but seemed to grow, intensifying the very rebellion out of which it had sprung.

All the happy carelessness of the afternoon had vanished. Talk about the peace and freedom of life in the country! She wasn't finding life peaceful or free right now. She hated Hampton Valley.

CHAPTER XVII

IN the days that followed, Heather vacillated between appreciation and distaste. She could see that Hampton had its share of interesting citizens, but there were not more than seven or eight of her old playmates in town. Only by combining different sets, could a dozen be collected for a picnic. In a community of a thousand people, this was a rather small oasis of similar interests.

She went off on walks and rides with the girls of her own age and a few of the younger boys, and she felt thoroughly in harmony with Hampton Valley. She loved the thick, rank grass in the fields down by the river, the wind through the poplars clearing the way for a storm, the mimic turbulence of Blue Creek over its pebbly bed glinting with mica, the hills dark with pointed spruce, the narrow roads between maple groves, the board fences tangled over with blackberry and clematis. Particularly she loved the companionship, the youthful exaggeration of every feeling that made existence of tremendous importance, and every minute an affair writ large; she loved the thought-free consciousness of physical well-being, of bounding spirits and racing blood.

But when she came back into the streets and houses of Hampton, she came back to a fixed order of things, to men and women settled into grooves, no longer

thrilling to any such nonsense as the joy of living—concerned, rather, with the serious matters of housework and business, groceries and dry goods, shading decorously into religion and sickness and death. They had passed that stage, brief in the career of the typical New Englander, when imagination may be stirred by the pollen on a humblebee or the sound of the waterfall on Pine Ridge; it stirred now only to the sound of news in the Valley, to the delectable tidbits of scandal, to the conjurings of the nimble-witted over the dramatics in this household and that. As their bodies grew more sluggish, their mental demand for spice grew more acute.

To meet this demand, Hampton had developed its observation and its analytic qualities. It was interested in everything that transpired or was reluctant to transpire—interested with an alertness that was a refreshing contrast to the apathy that often assails humanity in crowded centers; and it possessed the ability to work on any problem of any member of the community with an unflagging zeal that was the heritage from a patient ancestry.

Unlike larger settlements, Hampton was closely knit, so that the smallest details in the life of the most insignificant member became items of interest to all the other members and were exalted into an importance that was bound to be gratifying, because everyone likes to feel that his experiences are worthy of note. In Hampton he could be sure they were.

This was helpful, too. When Selah Flinker sold his cheap house on Hill Street and built one that cost double, he didn't have to lie awake nights wondering how he could meet the bills. No, Selah could doze off early,

assured that the entire community would work on that problem for him and would no more give up before it was solved than he would himself. Here were altruism and sympathy.

Whenever criticism reared itself, it was found to be justified and always traceable to its source in the frailty of some particular citizen. When Mrs. Truman Weatherwax came back from Boston with a new squirrel coat, it was pointed out that Styggles & Company had some excellent winter coats in stock, and had had them for two years now, so that Mrs. Weatherwax had no reason to be ignorant of the fact. Some of these coats were even trimmed with the same kind of fur which Mrs. Weatherwax had acquired by the lamentable process known as "takin' money outa Hampton." Nothing ostracizing was done to Mrs. Weatherwax for her disloyalty, but her lapse was put to its proper function of pointing a warning to others who might be wavering on the very brink of recalcitration.

When it became known that Angus Bigelow had paid five thousand dollars for a new car, it was a matter that was gone into thoroughly, because Angus had hitherto had more distinction for family and position than for money. Dr. Orion Martin, who came in for a shave, told Lem Tripe; and no sooner had Lem finished dusting the doctor off with the second grade of talcum than he washed his hands at the tin basin in the back room and closed the shop for such a period as would be necessary to confer with Jeff Cooper and Sam Hillock. No time was lost in putting this question under discussion.

True to psychology everywhere, the larger issues,

chiefly financial and political, were cared for by the men, while the women looked out for the finer shades of social conduct. Among the men, there were certain reserves, certain exemptions from comment. Although it was known that Abner Rider, who had an income of about a hundred dollars a month, often spent three hundred without running into debt, no fellow man drew any invidious conclusion about the discrepancy. Mr. Rider could depend absolutely upon the discretion of Mr. Andrew Hallowell, for instance, in whose mental hemispheres the source of Mr. Rider's elastic income was accurately registered. Mr. Hallowell's reticence was largely conditioned by the fact that Mr. Rider had some mental hemispheres, too, and in their memory cells was considerable information about Mr. Hallowell's expeditions to Moon Hollow and the lure that drew him there. The inter-action of such lines of policy, which might be designated as the Bond of the Memory Cell, was as effective in Hampton Valley as it is anywhere else, and it accomplished a great deal of forbearance. It was also in pleasing distinction from the more thorough and rasping methods of women, who have a keener desire that all should be frank and well ventilated.

Oddly enough, the verbal activity in Hampton was usually internecine. Toward the world outside, there was an astonishing indifference. In times of social and industrial turmoil, of conscious appraisement of human trends, it takes poise to stand aloof. One had to give Hampton credit for that poise; one had to admire Hampton's fine self-control, its dignified refusal to participate. True to an ancestry that had cut itself off from its mother country and then centered its forces

upon the problems which resulted from that act, Hampton kept to its corner and its own affairs. Fully informed about wider issues, it was unmoved by them; it was a sort of geographical replica of Le Penseur, sitting apart, quiescent, thinking thoughts not to be disclosed.

There were plenty of libraries in Hampton Valley, public and private; they were replenished with the newest books. The best magazines were strewn over many a correct reading table. But it was not considered good form to be disturbed over these matters. In conversation they were ignored, as if from a high-minded expectation of better things which might come along at any minute. Hampton deplored agitation and discussion of matters in any way remote; it stood for the conservation of mental energy, for freedom, for repose.

Ezra Sykes, night watchman at the foundry, summed up something along this line, for his audience on the wooden bench in front of Bean Brothers's grocery. Mr. Sykes was a tall, loose-jointed man with skin and hair the color of a baked potato, and he had a marked capacity for analysis and deduction.

Said Ezra: "The country's gone daffy on talk. Everybody's alla time bustin' into print, but ain't one of 'em hits the mark. What's the use in all these here editorials that the newspapers pay out good money for? Do they butter anybody's bread? Tell me now; do they?" He gave the bench a chance to answer if it could, but his hearers only shook their heads and murmured their fears that the country was going to the dogs.

"Sure it's goin' to the dogs," agreed Ezra with gusto. "And goin' fast. Ain't no wonder, neither. The hull

goshdarn caboodle is all took up with the'ries, and nobody gets down to business. Feller gets up on a platform in Chicago with ten yards of buntin' draped 'round it and a coupla flags over his head, and he tells a big crowd what's matter and what oughter be done. And 'nother feller in Denver, he gets up with s'more buntin' and s'more flags, and he tells 'em jest the oppersite. They bob up all over the Union, and ev'ry blamed one tells a diff'runt story. Can't none of 'em seem to get the straight of it."

While this appalling picture of the misguided orators hung before their vision, the thinkers of the bench pulled at their pipes and foresaw the early downfall of they hardly knew what. Mr. Jonas Dake, the blacksmith, was particularly responsive. He was a small dark man with a bullet head and gloomy black eyes. Like his friend Mr. Sykes, he enjoyed considerable daytime leisure, since anyone requiring his professional services always knew at once where to find him if he were not in his shop. Being invariably low in his mind about the future of anything now established, he was the first to voice encouragement of Mr. Sykes's pessimism.

"Aa-uh, Ezry, guess you've said it. Times ain't what they was once. I gol, they sure ain't."

Mr. Dake, having anchored himself to the safest sentiment going, relapsed into dark-blue cogitation, while Mr. Sykes stretched his worn boots further into the late-afternoon sunshine and pointed his criticism with an illustration.

"Now you take all this here splutteration 'bout the machinery of gov'munt, for instunce, and what it takes to run it. Well, now, gentlemun, they started that

machinery goin', didn't they? And now it's started, they can't stop it, can they? Well, then, what's the use jawin' 'bout it, one way or t'other?"

And there you were! With one simple twist of his agile brain, Mr. Sykes could flip out an answer to any problem. And yet, such is the tragedy of human inadvertence, many brilliant men continue to give their time and thought to an often fruitless search for solutions, whereas for the mere listening, those solutions would be tossed out, clear cut and final, from the wooden bench in front of Bean Brothers's grocery.

So far from national recognition, Mr. Sykes had not yet attained any high position in Hampton as an exponent of profundity. Heather Davenway, coming around the corner in time to hear Ezra's dictum about there being no use, was strictly in accord with the village when she cast a cynical eye on the bench audience and burst into Clif Stanleigh's store with a laughing comment on her lips.

But this innocent piece of derision was never uttered. It was the first time that Heather had been in here since her return, and she was not prepared for the atmosphere of impalpable depression that hung about the place. It had been a prosperous general merchandise store in the young manhood of Clif's father, when competition was less; but the very variety which had built up its patronage then, was now its greatest drawback. No one line was as complete and up to date as could be found elsewhere, and yet they were all represented: dry goods, crockery, hardware, groceries. The shelves were crowded with what seemed to Heather undesirable stock, although the goods were really fresh. The store was scrupulously clean, but the air was laden with the

emanation from cheap fabrics and the smell of cheap leather.

The back door was open. Tom Davis, the clerk, was carrying out a box of groceries. Clif Stanleigh came forward behind the counter.

"Mother forgot the butter, Clif," Heather began. "We must have it, or the boarders perish."

How inane her words sounded! Her voice was like a hollow squeak in this large, gloomy, cluttered room. It was so evident that she was trying to be cheerful! She felt futile, like one who longs to offer condolence to a friend and succeeds only in advising him to wear an overcoat because the wind is raw.

"Butter?" Clif smiled and turned with a flourish. "Two pounds, same as usual? Tom will take it over."

"No, I'll take it, Clif. Mrs. Spinkett would be scandalized if she saw me carrying it, but probably she's busy in her own kitchen, so I'll be safe from her criticism."

While he was getting the butter and wrapping it, she stood by the table of blue overalls with the brave trademark glaring from each garment. Her puzzled glance traveled from one item to another: the women's coats, boys' shoes and suits; the battered glass case of suspenders and neckties, handkerchiefs and hairpins; farther back, a dozen brooms tied into a grotesque bouquet; hoes and rakes against the wall; shelves of groceries; sacks of flour in a saggy pile. The floor was rough and uneven; the ceiling smoky from many winter fires in the huge round stove that stood in the center, red with rust and flanked by boxes of sawdust. What an awful place! Clif ought to do something.

He was coming back. How old his coat was! And

only a cheap gray check in the first place! The sleeves were shiny. Didn't Clif know that he must look prosperous if he would call trade? Why, just to come into this store was enough to send one flying out again.

"I was coming around after supper," he was saying. "You remember you said you'd like to go over under Mt. Echo, where our families used to have picnics, and I've been watching for a chance to get away. Well, I've got things fixed so that Tom can manage the store tomorrow afternoon, and Mr. Elliot says I can take his car. So if you can——"

"But I can't, Clif. Isn't it a shame? I'm going to Loopville." She didn't add that she was going with Wylie Chamberlain, but a sudden intuition told her that Clif had inferred it. "I'm terribly sorry." She spoke with that exaggerated regret by which one apologizes to a child for having crushed some makeshift plaything of no value, the effusiveness being a deference to the child's feelings. She was sorry for Clif in this gloomy, hopeless setting, and she was trying to force that general sympathy into the first medium that offered.

The moment of quiet in which he had received her announcement, had given him time to control his dismay over the defeated plan. He smiled at her.

"It was too short notice, anyway. I never can be sure of a day very long ahead. Perhaps some other time——"

"Yes, surely some other time," she agreed quickly.

He was still smiling pleasantly, but his eyes were sad. Heather could not endure the expression in their steady gray depths. It was this expression that set the present Clif apart from the Clif whom she had known years

before, and she couldn't see it without feeling sad and depressed herself. In the midst of this dreary collection of dubious wares, he reminded her sharply of a rabbit she had once seen caught in a trap, rolling his eyes in a pathetic but silent appeal for help.

She was glad to get out of the store. For once she was reconciled to the hurried preparations at home for the evening meal and even for the presence of the boarders, who would keep her so busy that she would not have time to think of this unpleasant episode. With all the force of a young and vital nature, she wanted to be happy, wanted to be surrounded by cheerfulness and success and real joy. She felt the rebellion of her own helplessness and of her natural optimism whenever she encountered the intangible atmosphere of tragedy which Clif Stanleigh seemed to carry about with him. She was happier when she didn't see him at all.

CHAPTER XVIII

NIGHT after night Miss Leathers came in to supper, and night after night Heather offered her lyonnaise potatoes or lamb croquettes or Washington pie, and chatted with her while half a dozen people listened—chatted and got no further.

"How can I get really acquainted with her?" Heather asked herself. "I don't know how to go about it."

As usual, it was the timid nature that made the first move. Heather was coming out of 'Bial Pember's meat market one afternoon, when Cula Clare called from her yard.

"Will you—won't you please come in a minute?"

Heather accepted with alacrity. She had never been in this house, nor had she ever been in any house that was at the same time so old and so unchanged from its original appearance and furnishing. The entry was a mere box, the width of the front door, and just deep enough for a door on each side. On the fourth wall was a black-walnut hat-rack with vicious porcelain prongs which threatened to impale a caller who ventured the second pace.

Cula Clare ushered her guest into the parlor.

"You take a seat," she said hospitably. "I want to get somep'n, but I'll be right back."

Heather sat down with the impression that she was sinking into a quicksand of antiquity that would choke

off her breath. The room was small and square, the floor painted gray and strewn with braided rugs, the windows hung with white muslin embroidered in chain-stitch. The fireplace was closed by a fireboard, papered like the walls, lined and bound with zinc. The wooden mantel, painted white, held two plaster of Paris images and three brass candlesticks, arranged by geometry. The chairs were cane seated, bedecked with patchwork cushions and macramé tidies. In one corner was a black-walnut whatnot, holding a rather extensive collection of seashells, which a hundred years before had enjoyed a tremendous popularity in this inland town, at that time further isolated by the lack of transportation facilities.

To Heather, accustomed to modern surroundings, this room seemed like a mummy-case of the past. The air was heavy and close, with that peculiar mustiness that comes from the slowly decaying foundations of an old house, combined with the insidious exhalation of rugs and furniture shut away from the air and sunshine as befitted the parlor of Old New England.

A gleam of metal from the mantelpiece drew Heather out of her chair. She went over, puzzled by the row of dull silver ovals slanted against the wall. They were the engraved name-plates removed from the caskets of Cula Clare's father and mother, her Grandfather and Grandmother Leathers, and two aunts.

Heather shivered. These relics of the past! This room, unchanged, generation after generation! She had always admired Colonial furniture, Colonial antiques; but in their original surroundings, unmodified, they had the depressing deadness of a museum. She had come upon stagnation, a past century fixed by some

preservative, whereas the very essence of life is change, evolution, infinite diversification. Surely the freshest youth, poured into a rigid mold like this, would take on the qualities of that concentrated antiquity which is stronger than any individual. In a flash Heather understood why Cula Clare seemed far older than her years, why she lacked initiative, why she was browbeaten by the town. She felt an overwhelming sympathy for Miss Leathers.

But she could not stay in Miss Leathers's parlor. She rushed into the entry, and nearly collided with Cula Clare.

"Oh," gasped Heather, "do pardon me. I wondered if you wouldn't let me come out into the sitting-room. I'd feel more at home. I don't want to be company."

"Why, yes, of course," assented Cula Clare, anxious to please but plainly bewildered that anyone should forego the honor of her best room. She felt as a hostess does who has prepared an elaborate menu, only to hear that her guest prefers dry toast and tea.

They went into the sitting-room, and Heather felt at once more comfortable, because it developed that nearly all the Leathers' possessions had been assembled in the parlor. The sitting-room, which was also the kitchen, was bare and bleak but less suggestive of former ages.

"These—I wanted you to see 'em." Cula Clare held out two strings of small gold beads.

"Oh, aren't they lovely!" cried Heather. Glad of a chance to be genuinely enthusiastic about something in this cheerless house, she admired and exclaimed till Miss Leathers's pale face took on a glow of gratified pride.

"I—I'd like you to have one of 'em," Cula said at length.

Heather looked at her in astonishment. The beads were thin but of solid gold, and they had the added value of antiquity.

"They belonged to my grandmother and my great-aunt," continued Cula Clare.

Heather found her voice. "You're the sweetest thing, Miss Leathers, to think of it, but it wouldn't be right. These belong in your family."

"There's nobody left but me." Cula Clare smiled at her faintly. "I—I'd like you to have one of 'em."

Heather reflected, running the shining beads through her fingers. She sensed something of the meaning under Miss Leathers's stiff phrasing—not all, but enough to make her hesitate in her instinctive refusal of so valuable a gift. A happily normal woman of the South or West, free from the taint of inherited stoicism, would have bubbled easily: "Darling child, I want to give you something because I adore you. I love to look at you. You're what I'd like to be, and never have been." A careless woman of the world would have tossed out: "Nonsense! You're the only young girl that's been decent to me. I'd like you to know that I appreciate it."

There was something of both attitudes in Cula Clare's heart, but she could not have expressed herself. She came of a race that frowned upon emotion as a moral weakness; that taught the suppression of all feelings, good as well as bad; that took for granted a reasonable amount of affection among relatives and close friends, but covered it with an immobility that robbed social intercourse of all gracious charm. Cula

Clare was deeply touched because Heather had been kind to her, had smiled at her, had chatted with her across the table when other girls would have ignored her or made her feel the impassable chasm of the few years that stood between.

But Cula could not have said this if her life had hung upon the words. She could only proffer her gift awkwardly, with an air of self-depreciation and an inarticulate word or two.

Heather, glancing up, encountered an expression as naïve and helpless as that of a frightened kitten. Her decision was an impulse of real affection. She sprang up and kissed the daughter of the Puritans on both her smooth white cheeks.

"I shall be so proud of them—always!" she cried. "Will you fasten them for me?"

Cula Clare snapped the gold clasp with fingers that trembled. She was blushing with embarrassment. She had not been kissed more than a dozen times in all her gray, dreary life—and those few times only when stress of sickness or approaching death had prompted the demonstration. Never before had any girl hugged her and given her a kiss of real joy. It was a heady experience—but agreeable.

Heather admired the beads before the mahogany-framed mirror above the clock shelf; then found another object for enthusiasm in a pitcher of gold luster on the table. Cula Clare, gratified, took her over to a cupboard and exhibited her china: sets of blue willow and of mulberry; brown platters by Clews; Davenport plates with scenes in green; a covered gravy-boat with a china ladle; bowls of flowing blue; pitchers of Leeds ware and of copper luster. She opened another

cupboard and brought out pewter porringers, graceful decanters and fragile wine glasses, Britannica teapots, teacups made before the day of handles, teaspoons of solid silver, thin and soft. They were her choicest entertainment.

And they were, Heather thought, the only things of beauty in Miss Leathers's life. As she turned around to the room again, she was struck afresh with its bleakness. The sanded floor was smooth and worn in hollows where the wood had been softest. The brick fireplace had been filled in; before it was a cook-stove, cheap but dazzlingly black. In one corner was a wooden sink; the rubber scraper with which to clean it, hung from a nail by the window. There was no furniture except three straight chairs, a splint-bottomed rocking-chair, and two small tables.

The fixity of this environment affected her strangely. Her bursts of naturalness were soon quenched by an impalpable influence of Unchangeableness. She felt that she would never be able to talk to Miss Leathers of simple, trivial things that would advance their understanding, unless she could get her into more simple and natural surroundings.

"Do you walk?" she asked suddenly.

"Walk!" Cula Clare looked at her with a puzzled wrinkling of the brows that in turn was a puzzle to Heather.

"Yes, walk. Do you take walks?"

Cula Clare shook her head. "Ain't anything to walk to—except the post office and to your mother's for supper."

"Oh," persisted Heather, "I mean can you walk a mile or two—down by the river or somewhere?"

Cula Clare considered this conscientiously. "I don't know. Nobody has—— I used to walk with the girls when I was in school. As far as I know, I guess I could. All is, I hain't tried it."

Heather's thoughts switched momentarily to California, where father and mother and the children and the grandparents hike up the nearest mountain to eat their lunch on the top of it, and then hike happily down again and call it a day's outing.

"Merciful heavens!" she said to herself. "Here's a woman with perfectly good muscles who doesn't know whether she can walk or not. It's high time somebody found out."

Aloud she suggested: "Suppose we try it. Let's walk down to the falls after supper. It'll be good for both of us."

She left Cula Clare delightfully fluttered. It had been years since Cula had been included even in the outer fringes of the younger life, because in Hampton Valley, where everybody's age is known, every woman is by common judgment predestined to the companionship of those who are within half a decade of herself. Cula found no pleasure in those of her own age, because of their superior matronly attitude and her own sensitiveness, and the arbitrary age distinctions of Hampton barred her from the younger sets that she watched with a wistful eye.

Indeed there were dark moments when Cula Clare, sipping her solitary tea from an exquisite cup of blue willow, meditated upon her fate and drew bitter conclusions. Why shouldn't she be judged by the same standard as—as Mrs. Erastus Dingwall, for instance? She and Ophelia Dingwall were the same age, but by

no means of the same status. Ophelia Dingwall was accepted everywhere as an equal; Cula was often treated with a kind condescension that set her apart.

If Ophelia ran a new wreath of bright poppies around an old black straw, her neighbors said: " 'Phelia's hat's real becomin' this year, ain't it?" But if Cula Clare secured a modest bunch of linen cornflowers from Mrs. Warren Buttles, the leading milliner, she was sure to overhear somebody say: "Ain't it shockin', the way Culie tries to perk up?" If Ophelia coerced the reluctant Ratty into providing her with a new brown satin, the town agreed: " 'Phelia's new duds are turrible stylish." But let Cula Clare so much as add a blue sash to an old gray silk that had been given to her, and an eloquent elbow nudged out the accusation: "Look at Culie Clare! Hain't give up hope yet!" It was freely whispered that the two Dingwall youngsters were "holy terrors," and that their mother "jawed Ratty somep'n awful"; but these domestic matters in no way interfered with Mrs. Dingwall's position as a matron among matrons or with her being selected for the honor of reading a paper on "The Home as a Factor in Civic Life" before the county conference of women's clubs.

The recurrent barb in these reflections was that Ratty Dingwall had wrought the difference. In her careless school days Cula Clare had not foreseen that this could happen. In fact, she had appraised the young Erastus so unfavorably as to refuse his escort to a "May Day Soci'ble"; and on another occasion when his exuberant fervor had led him to catch her in his arms and kiss her before the whole school yard, she had slapped him with a firm, indignant hand. It was

the only deed of violence in a blameless life; but if ever a slapped individual has taken toll for his humiliation, it was Ratty Dingwall, whose memory was like an elephant's and whose retaliation was of a far more continuous order.

He never lost an opportunity to remind her of the high-handed actions of her early youth, and there was much truth in the charge. Cula Clare had looked over the available young manhood among her mates and had been no more thrilled than a woman who waves aside the dress goods displayed for her selection and decides to wait for the next showing. The mistake came in pushing the analogy too far, because Hampton Valley was usually behind with its orders in the husband line, so that Miss Leathers found herself caught in an economic discrepancy between supply and demand.

No sooner did she realize this change in the situation than, from being independent, she became complacent—but too late. What avails it the chip to be willing to float on the current, if the stream has gone dry? And so from being complacent, she began to do a little in the way of skirmishing—but clumsily, lacking the skill of the finished technician. She was like an actress who gets laughter on her most solemn efforts.

From this period of failure she emerged, at the age of thirty, into the random expedients of desperation, only to find herself worse off than ever—still a failure because unattached, and now by public opinion intangibly but definitely cut off from full equality with women who had been her mates, shoved into a sort of ward for the incurables. She was not expected to have exactly the same interests or the same viewpoint

as those who had acquired their Rattys, but she was encouraged to distract her mind as much as possible with church work and movements for village improvement. It would be a surprise to the missionaries if they knew how many blasted hopes have gone into the boxes which they thoughtlessly unpack.

That night Cula Clare lingered at the Davenways's after the other mealers had gone. She went into the kitchen and helped with the supper work, after which she and Heather walked down through Hampton Valley together—out Checker Street, down Main, out Railroad, in the sight of many citizens who put themselves on record as being "s'prised that Heather Davenway should pick up Culie as a friend." It was the first move in the reinstatement of Miss Leathers, and Heather was glad that she could flaunt her championship before an unusual number of Hamptonites. Apparently absorbed in vivacious conversation with her companion, she marched through the crowd on Railroad Street that were waiting for the mail, and on toward the Loopville road, triumphantly conscious that they would be followed by many eyes and many comments.

CHAPTER XIX

IT was Sunday afternoon, oppressively warm and muggy. Moments of scorching heat were followed by intervals when the heavy white clouds blotted out the sun and left the world in a weird yellow-gray light. It threatened rain in a few hours. And it might rain for days if it once started. Heather was reminded of her promise to get some ground-pine for Grandma Davenway. Evidently she had better be about it.

The boarders had been duly gorged with the approved New England Sunday dinner, centering grandly about chicken fricassee and ice cream with angel cake, and the older ones had withdrawn for the equally stereotyped Sunday-afternoon nap—not so much a luxury as a necessity, since the outrageous demands upon digestion paralyzed all impulse to physical activity. Besides, when you are paying for three meals a day, it is a sort of financial obligation to be on deck for Sunday-night supper. But that meal was a buffet affair at the Davenways's which, after the gigantic pull of the one-o'clock dinner, left the afternoon the freest in the week.

Heather, with a large light basket on her arm, went up through the village and took the road toward Hemlock Knob. She knew where there was plenty of ground-pine—over on the bank above Crystal Chasm;

and she knew the quickest way to get there—across one corner of the Stanleigh farm and down through the Mather woods.

As she came in sight of the Stanleigh house she paused, struck afresh by its air of neglect, of dilapidation. The veranda sagged; the paint was peeling. Clif merely boarded there with the Baileys, who were running the place as agents but had no responsibility about keeping it up. And Clif—well, Clif had probably been terribly behind for years with everything that required money.

She did not go past the house. Instead, she branched down into a meadow and ducked through a fence of loosened barbed wire into the orchard where she and Clif had played in their childhood. She had reached the large rock which had been the starting-point of many games, when she heard a rustling in the dry grass. She rested one hand on the lichen-covered rock and craned her head to see what might be on the other side of it. This strategy disclosed another head and another pair of eyes, curiously reconnoitering. Like two turtles, she and Clif Stanleigh peered at each other around the rock.

"Oh, Clif," she cried in mock disappointment, "I thought it was a ground bird."

"And I," he countered, "being of a more practical nature, expected to see Timmy Bailey."

"Did you, really! Your imagination builds bigger shapes than mine."

"But also less poetic ones. In a moment I'll offer you a comfortable seat, soft and shady." He was pressing down a clump of brakes into a thick mat as

he spoke. "It's a magic seat. It'll take you back ten years and make you forget and——"

He checked himself, but she knew he had been about to say "and remember." It was a process more painful than pleasant, but she had not the courage to refuse the wistful invitation in Clif's eyes. She sat down in the nest of brakes and threw the basket aside.

"I was on my way to the ground-pine shop," she explained.

"Ground-pine? Who's suffering for that?"

"Grandmother. I promised her yards of it. She wants it to hang over her pictures and around the clock shelf. She says she's had it every summer for fifty years. Aren't habits strange things, Clif, if you stay still long enough to form them? Grandma Davenway seems to live in them and by them. She wants the same things to eat that she has always had, and the same kind of clothes, and she watches the calendar to see that she keeps the regular dates for housecleaning and pickling and preserving. Think of cutting out variety entirely! I wonder what would happen to Grandma if she had to do everything in a new way for a while. It might be good for her."

"It wouldn't be, though. It would make her unhappy and perhaps kill her. Habit is the trellis that supports the frail old vine, and you can't take the trellis away without injury."

"Oh, I suppose it's too late now, but I wouldn't have put up the trellis in the first place. It's terrible always to do the same thing and think the same thoughts. Why, where I've been living, people are hunting for new ways and new thoughts, and they're years younger than people of the same age here."

"Naturally. You've been living in the younger sections. Cosmopolitanism is the antithesis of routine and habit; and as for the West, that has drained the youth out of sections like this. It has been settled by those who had the pioneering spirit, the eagerness for change, the zest for working out new problems instead of sinking deeper and deeper into the grooves of old solutions. That is essentially the spirit of youth, and this corner of the country——" With a wave of his arm he indicated the green valley just below them—— "this corner of the country contains the residue, the stay-at-homes by the ancestral firesides. The young people who remain are those to whom the established ways are really congenial and who will readily settle into them—that is, all the young people except a very few."

"Except a few!" That was the class to which Wylie Chamberlain belonged. She wondered if Clif had been thinking of him, and how he would classify Wylie. But she did not mention him. Instead, under the encouragement of Clifton's unbias, she pushed her own thought a little further.

"There's something about it that I don't understand. You see, Grandmother not only tries to copy herself in everything she does, but she tries to do things just as her mother did, and her grandmother, and all the rest of the dear old ladies as far back as she has any traditions. Take that dress I brought her. She wouldn't wear it because she never had worn anything like it, and because her mother hadn't, either, and so on—backwards. Now that's not living a life of your own. It's an evasion of individuality; it's a copy-cat existence."

"Good heavens, Heather, Grandma Davenway is merely trying to honor her ancestors by ordering her existence in accord with theirs."

"Yes, of course, but that's only copying, even after you've put all those kind words around it. Really, it's ancestor worship."

"Well, why not? Look at the Chinese. They worship their ancestors and get along very comfortably doing it."

"I don't see any reason why there should be a similarity. The Chinese are as different as possible. We think they're heathen, a yellow——"

"But so are marigolds," he interrupted, laughing. "There is nothing uniquely distinguishing about that. The point of similarity I meant was that the Chinese and the New Englanders both represent an old and fixed civilization—if you'll admit the term for China."

"I don't follow you, Clif. I thought America was new."

"Only in years, which aren't always a criterion of age. Vermont and one or two other states are still colored by Puritanism, and the Puritans were old when they were young. They came to this country with a staid, middle-aged attitude. There was nothing of youthful adventuring about it, none of the commercial ambition that actuated the Dutch, none of the real pioneer spirit that seeks an outlet for energy and initiative.

"The Puritans came for a solemn purpose, and they took themselves and their object very seriously. They sincerely believed that the safety of their souls hung by a precarious thread and that they must look sharp and keep their eyes fixed as much as possible on the

next world. There was nothing light and jaunty about that; nor was there anything light and carefree about the hardships that they encountered. Naturally the second generations were brought up on tales of the dangers and privations that their fathers and mothers had endured, and they came to think of them as martyrs and to regard them in consequence with unusual veneration, to look upon them as patterns of all that was good and brave. Well, that attitude has grown, and it persists. You're right that it's a habit, but it's a habit that has some reason behind it."

"You're much more reflective and just than I am, Clif," she acknowledged. "I believe, as you say, that I must be terribly severe. And when I find something that puzzles or displeases me, I'm too much inclined to assume that it sprang up yesterday and could be changed tomorrow."

"Or today," he corrected, with an indulgent smile. "You would never be willing to wait till tomorrow."

Her eyes strayed down through the orchard, where the apple trees lurched toward one another in irregular rows. They were bent and gnarled, their branches twisted into grotesque scrolls. Half of them were dead, killed by an unusual frost; many were dying, live branches fighting for existence while joined to branches already gray and leafless.

Clif had said that sitting here by the rock would take her back ten years. Well, it did, but only in ways of sad comparison. Ten years ago these trees were vigorous, laden with apples—greenings, Astrakhans, Tolman sweets. Clif's parents were living. Clif was a growing boy, full of physical exuberance and high spirits. The days were not long enough for the joyous

explorations and discoveries that the out-of-doors offered. How hard they had played, like sturdy puppies, with no thought beyond the game of the moment! And now they were sedately discussing an environment that they had once without question accepted as satisfactory. They were more or less detached from it now, Clif as well as she; they were no longer complacent, but critical, pouncing upon flaws and holding Hampton up to a standard that they had not glimpsed as children.

Yet Heather felt that she still wanted to play. Her whole being called out to enjoy, to be happy, to be carefree. It was the recurrent frustration of that demand which had caused her rebellion in the weeks since she had returned to Hampton Valley. But Clif——

She stole a glance at him, sprawling in the dry grass in front of her. He was leaning on one elbow, his abstracted gaze on the meadow beyond the orchard, where the shadow of a huge cloud limped rapidly over the green rowen. Clif had certainly passed his play days; he looked grave and troubled, as if something were crushing the spring of his existence into utter futility.

Her face sparkled and she leaned forward in her eagerness. "It does me good, Clif, to hear you talk. It makes me feel that I'm not so far wrong as these people try to make me believe if I venture an adverse word."

"Oh, you're barred," he said, looking at her lazily and with amusement at her vehemence. "You're virtually an outsider, and silence should be your cue. But I belong, which gives me latitude. Curious thing! Every few weeks I read somewhere that Vermont is comparatively isolated, and that this peculiarity and

another are the result of that isolation. Wouldn't that make you smile? Because you and I know that it isn't isolated. It's in touch with everything, but it doesn't care a hang. It is always trotting off to the big world and taking a look around and coming back with a haughty disdain for what it's seen. It hauls all the new things in here and labels them and has them to show, but it deliberately chooses not to get excited about them."

"And who are you," she rallied him, "that you can say these things, when I mustn't utter a syllable? Tell me the safe people in town with whom you can discuss these treacheries."

"You don't like Hampton a little bit, do you, Heather?"

Her brows lifted quizzically. "I don't know whether I do or not. I have good times here, and I love some of the people—just simply love them, as much as I do people anywhere else. But the town as a town—— No, I suppose I haven't much patience with it. If it were only like the best of its citizens—but it isn't. I can't stand its lifelessness, its intolerance of the slightest criticism, its—— Why, do you know how Hampton treats me? Kindly, commiseratingly! It's sorry for me because I've been out of it for practically eight years, and it assumes that fortune is now favoring me because I'm in its midst again. Oh, if there's anything I can't endure, it's smugness."

Suddenly his gray eyes danced in unfeigned amusement. "You don't recognize a life-preserver when you see it."

"A life-preserver?"

"Yes. Hampton has to keep its head as high as

possible, doesn't it? And it does it by putting up a front, just as all other small towns do—and big towns, too, for that matter. The city spreads itself just as much, but it can point to definite industries and buildings and achievements which you accept as justification. Or perhaps you say: 'Oh, well, a city has to advertise itself, or it would lose out in competition with other cities and never get more industries and more capital to enlarge and beautify it.' Or else you say that it has a boosters' club or a live chamber of commerce. In any event, you rather admire its enterprise.

"But it's exactly the same trick that offends you in Hampton. The small town doesn't issue pamphlets and advertise in periodicals and send circulars to the restless who are looking for new locations. The boosting is done by the individual citizens, and it gives a different effect, but it's really the same thing. They exalt the place they live in, to keep themselves contented and to keep all the other townspeople contented. If they didn't, who would pay any attention to a little pinprick on the map like Hampton? Of course they're smug; they have to be. Why, don't you know that smugness is the capsule that protects the powder of insignificance? Suppose the Hamptonites were to go around saying that this wasn't much of a town, not half so good as Loopville and Moon Hollow, and not to be mentioned in the same breath with Broomfield. How long would there be any Hampton? Everybody would get out as fast as he could."

Heather's eyes narrowed mischievously. "Do you mean to tell me, Clif, that smugness is a virtue that makes for progress and development?"

"Good heavens, I hope not. I'm only saying that smugness is a widespread characteristic of community life—and of national and racial life, as well. It's an outgrowth of human nature—not of Hampton Valley —and it has a certain function, but I'll admit that it's sometimes pushed too far."

"I think you'd better. Don't you advocate that it might be waived long enough for Hampton to see that it needs a new auditorium in place of that ramshackle barn of a hall that was probably a wreck when I was born; that its trees ought to be pruned, both because they make the houses damp and because it's not safe to walk under them in a high wind; and that it ought to give its young people as much care and supervision as it gives its cemeteries; and that——"

"Help!" he interrupted, laughing. "Hampton is right; you have been gone too long. You're looking at things with the cold eyes of a stranger. Hampton may be a bit easy about that town hall and the trees and a good many buildings on Railroad Street and Vine and Barbour that are too old and shaky to suit a progressive rat; but you'd find the same thing true anywhere else. Housekeeping is about the hardest thing for any community to learn. Folks get accustomed to whatever happens to exist, and it takes the outsider to criticize. It takes the little Heathers to come back and tell 'em."

"Clif! Now you're laughing at me."

"Sure I'm laughing at you. There's nothing else to laugh at just at present, and you want me to be as happy as possible, don't you?"

"Yes," she said slowly, her thoughts turning on the word. "Yes, Clif, I'd like to see you a lot happier than you appear to be."

He sat up straight, looking away as if to avoid her direct gaze. Heather was acutely sorry she had spoken. In a panic she sought for some way of obliterating the words, which had taken on in the very uttering a significance deeper than she had intended. They had touched a vital chord that was vibrating painfully; she could see that. She could not endure Clif's abstracted silence; still less could she endure the brave evasion which she felt he would make when he had recovered himself.

All the lightness had dropped out of his face, leaving it graver and more troubled than ever. In spite of the happy comradeship of their childhood, they were fairly strangers when it came to understanding each other's mature problems; and his first reaction was the wholly masculine aversion to the mention of an intimate personal matter.

"I was just thinking about the store," she floundered, "and that it's a hard life for you." She sprang up. "I must get that ground-pine, instead of being lazy like this." She spoke hurriedly, awkwardly.

"I'll go along and help." He picked up his hat and the basket.

But as they went down through the orchard, she knew from the expression on his face that he was still absorbed by the thoughts which she had set in motion.

CHAPTER XX

HEATHER could think of nothing to say. She was warmly conscious of Clif's friendship and of his pleasure in being with her again, and yet she knew that he was more acutely unhappy than he had been before she invaded the orchard.

He helped her through the rusty barbed wire fence, and they crossed the meadow over the soft carpet of rowen. The clouds were thickening; the sunshine seemed to spend itself on their upper surface, leaving only a strange, uncanny radiance to drop over the edges.

When they had entered the coolness of the Mather woods, he spoke abruptly. "I suppose the store seems rather awful to you, Heather."

"Oh, that wasn't what I meant," she protested, miserably aware that she was the one to hunt for evasion. "I—I only meant that it doesn't seem to be your work."

She shrank before the laugh with which he greeted this lame explanation. It was not a sound of mirth. "What do you make out my work is?"

"Why, I—I don't know." Then her voice grew more resolute. Having committed herself, she might as well go through with it. "I don't believe it's that store, Clif. You don't like it, do you?"

"I loathe it."

"Well, then——"

He shook his head. "It doesn't follow. The store, awful as it is, has brought in a fair income, and my work is to keep the Stanleigh family alive—physically alive, till the time comes when they get their recognition. That's my work, and by heaven, I'm going to see it through."

She was startled by the vehemence that underlay his controlled tone. He was walking rapidly down through the maple aisle—so rapidly that she had to take a running step now and then to keep up with him. His eyes were fixed straight ahead, as if every fiber of his being were strained to reach a certain goal. She understood now that it was this responsibility and the inner tenseness that came of its difficulties, that made Clif seem different, older.

It was not until they came out into the narrow stretch of open land above the bank that his preoccupation broke. He turned with a smile of apology.

"Mason will get his degree in another year. He's taken a stiff course—engineering, and managed to get in some extra credits. The poor boy's tried to pay part of his expenses and he's plugged at some job every summer, but I wouldn't listen to his spending half his youth earning money to pay for his training. He's stood very high and he's bound to get a good position next year—but it's taken a hole out of the Stanleigh General Merchandise.

"And Ward—well, Ward promises to pull in first. He's finally written a play that's stirred up considerable faith even in critical little old New York. It's to have a try-out in Atlantic City next month; and if it goes——"

"Oh Clif, I do hope it will," she broke in fervently. "Wouldn't that be fine, after all the years he's been trying? And wouldn't Hampton be surprised and proud?"

"It would be surprised," he agreed grimly.

They began pulling up the fragrant lengths of ground-pine that trailed thickly over the bank, at intervals upholding a tuft of green that suggested the pine tree.

"I wish it wasn't too late for arbutus," Heather said wistfully. "Didn't we strip this poor old bank when we were youngsters?"

"Sure we did. We never left any vegetation if it appealed to us for vases or for barn decorations."

"There, Clif," she cried suddenly, "don't pull another poor old ground-pine, please. Grandmother'll think we're giving her a forest if you do."

But they did not go back at once. It was pleasant in the shade of the maples and poplars and young hemlocks, and they sat there lazily listening to the water of Blue Creek plunging over the sheer face of rock above Crystal Chasm.

"I never hear you speak of the West, Heather," Clif said wonderingly. "Didn't you like it?"

"Loved it. If I could move New York into nearer reach of it, I'd like to live there. It's wonderful in its space and bigness and physical freedom. But I don't mention it."

"Why not?"

"Because Hampton isn't interested. Hampton has its own opinion of the West and doesn't care to hear any other. It thinks that the West is inhabited by people who haven't any background or any breeding,

that Indians lurk behind the trees on the country roads, that rattlesnakes trail through the streets and may come up on the porches, that earthquakes are so frequent as to make you feel you are in a rocking-chair all the time, and that the ranches are run by bronco busters in chaps and sombreros, armed to the teeth and swinging lariats as the most serious business in life."

He glanced at her slyly. "Strikes me from my reading that the West has its opinion about the East, and that it's just as extreme."

She admitted it readily. "Oh, yes, the West thinks that Vermont is 'a quaint little state,' full of pie and mahogany; that in the villages you constantly meet faded old ladies in wide skirts, starched fichus, and gold-rimmed spectacles, who are rabid about showing you the family album and telling you stories that begin, 'I can remember the time'; and that out in the country you constantly find a grizzled old farmer leaning over his fence while he strokes his whisk-broom beard with a bony hand and drawls: 'Wal, naow, haow dew yew dew?' "

He laughed. "That certainly evens the score."

"Evens it, yes; but the odd thing is that they both know better. They're constantly sending scouts back and forth who tell them a different story, but the pictures persist. The East gets its version from those novels of a wild and lurid West which no longer exists except in gifted imaginations, prodded by a greedy commercialism. The quiet little Hampton Valley Library deals them out to your eager Hamptonites as fast as it can get hold of the funds to buy them. And the Westerner builds up his pictures of Vermont from museums, Colonial furniture, daguerreotypes, and

vaudeville caricatures. But both sides are satisfied, so probably it's all right. Nations treat one another the same way. Each one exaggerates the weaknesses and foibles in the others, and holds the pictures even while knowing that they're not typical. It seems to be human enough, and surely fair when the scores are balanced."

"One thing I like about the world," contributed Clif slowly, "is that the folks in it are human. It's enough to keep a person interested all the time if he doesn't allow his mind to wander from it. And I don't know very many people, either, except from books. Sometime maybe——" He broke off with a wave of the hand that characterized this ambition as exceedingly remote.

"Before long," she said with false exuberance, "I predict that you'll be traveling everywhere. I'm sure that play will be a success. I have great faith in your brother."

But her gaiety fell flat before his deepened gravity. "So have I, but good Lord—— Did you ever think what it must be to have something inside you urging you on and on—something that you can't kill and that apparently gets you nowhere? I often wonder what mother did to her sons. Do you remember her well?"

"I think I do. I remember her as sweet and sad and——"

"Yes," he interrupted bitterly, "that was mother. She must have gone through hell."

Heather stared at him, wide eyed. She was amazed and shocked beyond words. What could he mean? His quiet tone indicated that the thought was not a new one. She waited in horror for him to go on.

"My mother had an unusual gift for modeling and she had begun to work in marble when she came here on a visit from Ohio, where she was born. She was young and she fell in love with my father; and probably without thinking twice about what it would mean, she married him. It must have been tragedy—a continual, day-to-day tragedy. My father, you know, was a good man, but contented with small things; and she —— She was simply stifled on this grubby farm, with the endless housework and three children to look after. She couldn't have had much social life; she had no chance to express the dreams that haunted her or to meet people who talked the language in which she dreamed. I've come to realize in the last few years that it was the urge in her which had no outlet, that she passed on to her sons; and now the struggle that she could do nothing with, is ours, to make or break us.

"Of course it took different forms. Mason's engineering bent was unmistakable; he'll do big things when he's ready. But Ward—Ward got the harder deal. He was eight years older than I, and a lot of things went over my head that have come back to me since. But I knew folks thought he was a queer boy because he didn't care more about school and sports. He was crazy about books, and I've known him to sit motionless for an hour and if anybody spoke to him, he'd say: 'Don't talk. I'm listening.'

"I remember one fall morning we were in the barn, and Ward had some squashes and pumpkins on the barn floor. He was arranging them and moving them about here and there, when mother came in. Ward held up a finger and said: 'Come still, mother; they're talking.'

"I was only a little lump of clay at the time, about four years old, but I've never forgotten the heart-breaking expression that came over mother's face. It seemed to me she stood there a long time; and then she made a rush and took Ward into her arms, and the tears rained down her cheeks. But all she said was: 'My poor boy; my poor boy!'

"I thought she was sorry for Ward because he didn't have better playthings, but I know now that she realized Ward was living in a world of unreality, and she foresaw the long struggle he would have before he learned to translate his dreams into a language that the public would understand and appreciate. I think she was always sorry for Ward—and yet firm. She made father send him to New York, so that he could see what others had done and so that he could be in touch with those who were working along his own line of interest. And when she had to—to leave us, her last words to me were: 'Oh, if you can, see that Ward has his chance.'"

His low voice stopped, as if that were the whole explanation of the last seven years—as indeed it was. Again he was looking straight ahead with that removed vision that had nothing to do with material objects. Heather felt breathless, shaken by this confidence that left her further outside than before. What could she say that would lighten Clif's discouragement, his weariness?

In the deep silence she could hear the plashing of water over the rock above the chasm. A squirrel leaped from one branch to another with a brief rustling of leaves. A crow scolded from a tree on the hill.

Clif's absorption continued. But to Heather's hor-

ror, his expression changed, subtly, apparently without any altering of the muscles. Surely his mother had never looked more "heart-breaking." This was the Clif whom she had glimpsed from her own yard when he had picked up her hat on the back porch—a broken, disillusioned man. There was again in his face the appalling forecast of what he might be a few years hence unless something saved him—a beaten, submerged human being.

She could not endure it. It wrung her heart to see him so wretched. She sprang up.

"Oh, Clif!" she cried, rushing toward him on an unconsidered impulse.

He sprang up also, startled by her sudden action. Before the solicitude in her face, his expression softened, melted into a tenderness that she had never before seen in him. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down into her upturned eyes. "Heather dear," he said softly.

"Oh, Clif," she went on, still pleading, "you mustn't——"

She had intended to say, "You mustn't look like that," but the words died on her lips. His hands dropped from her shoulders as if they had been struck away.

"No," he said savagely, "no, I mustn't. Sometimes I'm as big a dreamer as my brother. . . . I think it's raining."

The first heavy drops were striking the crisp leaves of the maples. Clif picked up the basket. Heather gathered up an armful of the long green vines. They came out into the open.

"Your dress is thin," he said practically. "Shall we run?"

So they ran through the maples and across the meadow. Heather caught her foot in a swinging loop of the ground-pine and fell headlong in the thick rowen. She was full of laughing self-blame as Clif helped her up, but was secretly glad that she had been clumsy, because it had taken them momentarily back into that past of similar accidents and escapades—into that realm of memory which seemed to be the only happy meeting-ground possible to them now. Nothing could disturb that, but the present was uncertain and prickly with painful possibilities.

The sprinkle passed for the time being, but they hurried nevertheless—down into the village to leave the vines with Grandma Davenway. And they talked assiduously, keeping to speculations about the dark scudding clouds and how soon it would really rain, because those were safe matters in which neither had any vital interest.

Later it occurred to Heather that Clif had not said what his own inheritance from his mother had been.

CHAPTER XXI

MR. ZELOTES JOSELYN was attired in a manner bound to be dangerous to susceptible hearts. His suit was a tender shade of fawn, and his soft hat the color of coffee à la Jersey cream. His brown shoes and tie gave exactly the right contrast, aided by the sprig of pink geranium in his buttonhole. Jauntily he was swinging a slender cane, jabbing it into the sidewalk now and then with the light skill of a housekeeper sticking a broomcorn into her baking cake. To the accustomed eyes of Hampton, it was evident that Lote was "perked up with some new bee in his bunnit."

It was only three o'clock, and Mr. Joselyn had no shadow of an engagement at Mrs. Davenway's until six, but he had been past the house twice now—casually, yet with an alert glance toward the porches and yard. Ostensibly his terminus was Jeff Cooper's drug store, where he gravely revolved the tin rack of picture post cards, unaware that both Jeff and his clerk, Sid Morrow, were draped against the wall case of hair tonics and shampoos, agreeing in whispers: "The durn thing'll need oiling when Lote gets good and through a-turning it." After ten minutes of steady revolution, the rack came to rest and Mr. Joselyn selected a card portraying a portion of the Spinooski River, set in rocks. His purchase consummated, he retraced his

steps past Mrs. Davenway's to his own ancestral home, where he presumably deposited the post card in a safe place. Then he reappeared and again walked slowly down Checker Street.

But this time not past Mrs. Davenway's! A flutter of blue muslin in the garden arrested his attention. With a brighter light in his face he stepped around to the garden—stepped rather dapperly, too.

Heather, cool and dainty in her blue gown and wide shade hat, was snipping the dead roses from the bushes. When she saw Zelotes approaching, she caught her breath sharply before the realization that the time had come for her to redeem her rash promise about taking over the directing of this gentleman's future. Besides, she could no longer ignore her mother's warning. Mr. Joselyn's calls had become of daily occurrence, their object more and more pointed. Heather was new; and being new, she had called down upon herself the fickle searchlight of his favor.

"I've got to do something," she told herself savagely. "Very well, I will. I'll do it right now—this afternoon —at once."

Fortified by this fierce generality, she greeted Mr. Joselyn with a light smile.

"Will you come into my garden?" she said hospitably. "I can offer you a seat under the apple tree. You can sit and watch me work."

Mr. Joselyn swept off his hat with an exaggerated gallantry that he had found to be most effective.

"Let me work while you watch."

She laughed. "Gracious! You'll force me to be lazy." She threw down her shears and took one of the two battered arm-chairs that had served genera-

tions indoors and were now flaunting their decrepitude in the open.

But when they had seated themselves, neither could think of the right thing to say. Each hoped that a definite object would be consummated in the next few minutes, but they were like attendants at a theater who wait impatiently for the curtain to rise but have no power to pull the cords. The silence became awkward.

"Are you expecting your sister back soon?" asked Heather in desperation.

Zelotes gave a tremendous sigh of relief, as if his sister were the very person whom he had been hoping to drag over the conversational horizon.

"In a few days, yes. Time she was gettin' back, too. There's a number of things I want to talk over with her."

This placed the topic in those domestic precincts closed to the outsider. Heather could think of no way to continue with Mrs. Miller, so she struck out wildly for another subject.

"We're having pleasant weather," she floundered, on the chance that so obvious a fact might be the key to easy verbiage.

"Ye-uh, today," admitted Mr. Joselyn cautiously. "But I call it we've had a good many changes. Pretty cold last week. I notice your sweet corn ain't tosselin' out a mite yet."

Heather shook her head over the backwardness of corn and contributed an inanity about the shortness of the season.

"Ye-uh, now you've said it, Heather. Keeps the

veg'tables humpin' to get grown before the frost it lays 'em low."

She nodded. "They certainly have to hurry to escape 'the frost on the pumpkin.' Those poems about fall would have to be moved back into the summer to fit this section, wouldn't they?"

"Well, hardly that," discriminated Mr. Joselyn, with ponderous exactitude. "To about September, I should say." Being now fully launched on the sea of expression, he reached for the original subject and gave it an easy toss or two. "Speakin' of my sister, I got a few things to arrange with her. I suppose you know that the house where we're livin' belongs to me."

"Yes," she acknowledged faintly.

Mr. Joselyn readjusted his lapel, as if the pink geranium were calling for a more comfortable position, and swallowed hard. "My sister," he continued presently, "has wanted to go to the hotel to live—for some time she's wanted to; but she couldn't, 'count of me. I—well, I'm thinkin' of lettin' her go."

"How sweet of you!" bubbled Heather jerkily. "I'm sure she'll be grateful. It's so nice to do what one wants to!"

"Aa-uh, that's the way I figger. I figger mebbe we'll both be better suited that way. Fact is, I'm thinkin' of—of keepin' house myself—— No, not myself, but—— Say," he exploded, breaking into nervous laughter, "say, I'll bet you know what I mean."

Heather reached backward and broke a late damask rose from the bush near her chair. She felt as if she must hold to something, and even a rose would give an illusion of anchorage.

"Say, don't you—don't you know?" he persisted, with a foolish grin.

She smoothed the pink petals, and above them was able to smile at him roguishly. "Mr. Joselyn," she challenged, "I believe you're announcing your engagement."

"No. Oh, no, I ain't," he disclaimed quickly. "I hain't got so fur's that. I'm just on the way." He hitched his chair considerably nearer, in a manner which gave an alarmingly literal turn to his words.

Heather braced for the plunge. Zelotes's amorous expression forbade any further delay. She summoned a mental picture of Cula Clare in all her wistfulness and pathetic isolation, and nerved herself to be quick and cruel.

"You want me to guess, I conclude. Well, I'll try. I suppose it's some lady in Hampton Valley."

"Right!" gurgled Mr. Joselyn, vastly encouraged. He felt that things were going well and would in the course of a pleasant circuitousness mount to their desired climax. "Right! Ain't you the cute little one!" He rolled his eyes ecstatically. "In Hampton Valley —and near. Near—and nearer!" He put his hand again on the chair-arm, as if about to exemplify the proximity of the chosen charmer, but Heather's next remark arrested the action.

"Someone of your own age, of course."

"Huh? No—well, I should say not. Come, now, ain't you the coy——"

"Oh, dear me, Mr. Joselyn, that doesn't sound so promising. I do hope you aren't going to be disappointed."

"Huh? What!" His bright eyes opened wide in alarm.

"Do forgive me. Perhaps I oughtn't to have said that, but you asked me to speculate about it. And when you said it wasn't a lady of your own age, I really couldn't think of anybody that would marry you. Truly I couldn't."

He stared at her in speechless stupefaction. His black eyes seemed to be fixed unwinkingly; his flabby face took on a sickly greenish tinge that showed how keenly the thrust had cut. Heather was sorry for him, but she kept her objective firmly in view. The pink in her cheeks grew deeper, and her dark eyes had the open, innocent expression of a child who has made a mistake but hopes to explain it satisfactorily.

"You oughn't to have asked me about this," she accused gently, "but as long as you made me express myself, let's see how near right I am. Honestly, Mr. Joselyn, who is there that would—would consider you eligible?"

Zelotes's pride assembled the scattered shreds of his self-possession, as the magnet collects the iron filings.

"I had supposed," he began stiffly, "that I was as good a citizen as the next one, and——"

"But are you?" Heather lifted the statement with a quick finger and pinned it back with a little flip. "Are you? Oh, of course I know you're a perfectly nice man—or were originally. But you haven't the standing that you ought to have. Do you know what Hampton calls you?"

Zelotes's mouth dropped.

"They call you 'that old beau,'" pursued Heather regretfully. "'That old beau!'" She repeated the

phrase with a slighting inflection that drew from Mr. Joselyn a sound like a respiration tried and rejected. "They're too kind to let you know it, but that's what they call you when you're not around." She might have added that his possession of a good house and a comfortable income, gave him a certain insulation from direct criticism, and that he had interpreted this insulation as real respect.

"You see, Mr. Joselyn, a man of your age ought to stand for something; and if he doesn't, neither men nor women have any genuine, thoroughgoing regard for him. If he's interested in women, he ought to marry and have a home; he owes that to the community. If he isn't domestic, he ought to devote himself to some serious purpose that is worthy of a grown man. Otherwise he is a parasite on the life of the community. Don't you see how it is? Now you—why, you just flit—and flit—and flit." With her left hand she indicated Mr. Joselyn as occupying different stations in the atmosphere in rather rapid succession. "Or we might say you're like a man who starts to cross a stream, plants his feet on stones that are wide apart, and then refuses to move. He's neither here nor there, and of course people that watch him can't help laughing at his foolish predicament. He ought to stay on the bank or go on across. Don't you think?"

Mr. Joselyn was again speechless, and the lines in his face were hopelessly slack. Only his hands moved, whirling nervously around the ends of the chair-arms like pinwheels in a breeze.

Heather's gaze left him. She studied the green rows of corn behind him as if working on a difficult problem.

"It's been going on so long—that makes it harder," she reflected aloud. "The fact is, women don't care much for old beaux except to flirt with. The attitude gets to be wholly mutual. That's why—— But let me see who there might be. There's Mrs. Giddings ——"

Mr. Joselyn emitted a sound which in the case of a less polished gentleman would have been considered a snort.

"——and Mrs. Pickering—and Mrs. Flumm——"

But as she continued, Mr. Joselyn's reactions were so uniform that she did not finish the list. It was evident that middle-aged widows took no active part in Mr. Joselyn's arena—occupied, rather, the more remote seats in the balcony.

She tried the other extreme. "The young set—well, you know how that is. Youth calls to youth, and all that. Then there are the ladies somewhat beyond. Miss Nancy Hobart—no, she's far too aristocratic. Miss Leathers—dear me, no. She would never——"

Zelotes was roused to angry articulation. "Well, I should like to know!" he burst out. "You're goin' too far. I'll betcha Cula'd take——"

"Poor man!" interposed Heather, looking down at the rose in her hand with a pitying expression. "How can you be so deceived? Why, you couldn't expect a woman of her ancestry—— Miss Leathers has family; she has background." Heather privately thought Miss Leathers had far too much of it, but she waived the commentary.

Slow mottles of red were mounting in Zelotes's cheeks. "I rather guess," he brought out explosively, "I rather guess you're goin' it too strong. All Hamp-

ton knows how desp'rate Cula is. Why, I'll betcha if I so much as quirked my little finger——"

"Not if you quirked all ten," interrupted Heather, with a sweeping gesture.

"What makes you think?"

"I asked her." She was feeling her way carefully now, treading the path of evasion and implication whereon a single mis-step would be disastrous. "I had an idea you thought that, Mr. Joselyn, and so I—I brought up the subject. You know women talk rather intimately sometimes." She spoke as if this dark secret had not hitherto been disclosed. "We talked it over, and I assure you that I know exactly how Miss Leathers feels."

Zelotes slumped in his chair. Heather played thoughtfully with the damask rose and allowed the full import of her message to sink into Mr. Joselyn's consciousness. Presently he grasped at a bit of floating wreckage and made another attempt to keep his head above water.

"I'd like to know why Cula came in to suppers if—if she wasn't tryin'——"

"Good gracious!" cried Heather, with a wide-eyed look that sent her eyelashes into a distracting sweep. "Don't you know women better than that?" She laughed, as if this were too much. "Why, that's the very thing that ought to have showed you how wrong you were. Don't you know that no woman with a grain of sense ever throws herself at a man? It's the surest way to fend him off. Miss Leathers came here for the same reason that you did—because my mother is a fine cook. And besides that, she's a friend of mine, and it's pleasant for both of us. I'd be glad if she

came to breakfast, too. She's a most unusual and interesting woman." She laughed again, this time mischievously. "It's odd that you didn't connect me with it, but took all the drawing power to yourself. Isn't it? It just shows how deceived a man may——"

Mr. Joselyn rose. "I think I will bid you good afternoon," he managed with exceeding dignity.

"Good-by," said Heather cheerfully. She gave him her hand with a friendly smile.

But she watched with apprehension as he walked out of the garden and around the corner of the house. He was not by any means the dapper gallant that had tapped a jaunty cane into the asphalt of Hampton an hour before. He was trying to hold his head high, but he had a crumpled look. He walked stiffly, as if his muscles were not wholly in control. The fawn suit and pink geranium were pitifully incongruous with the manner of the stricken Zelotes.

"Heaven forgive me," thought Heather. She picked up her shears and started for the house. "Still, something ought to come of it," she reassured herself.

She found her mother in the kitchen, frying raised doughnuts for supper.

"I think I'll go over to Kitty Judevine's, after all, mother, if you can get along. She invited me to supper, you know, but I told her I wasn't sure. I thought you'd need me."

"Well, I don't," declared Mrs. Davenway heartily. "You ought to go out more. I'm perfectly equal to one supper." She glanced sidewise at her daughter's flushed face. "What happened, dear?"

Heather laughed shakily. "I've just performed an operation, mother—taken the conceit out of a human

being. Sliced it out, like that!" She cut the air with a swift slash of her hand and hung the garden shears by the sink. "I got it all, but it was a hard siege."

Mrs. Davenway speared a doughnut with her knitting needle and drained it against the side of the kettle. "What have you done now?" she asked with a quizzical smile.

"I've told Zelotes Joselyn that no woman in Hampton Valley would have him."

"Heather Davenway!"

"Yes, mother, I didn't leave him a hope. I listed the possibilities and checked them out with my best arguments."

Mrs. Davenway weakly flipped the doughnut from her needle into the pan on the warming-shelf and turned to Heather in real dismay. "My stars, dear child, what possessed you?"

"I thought it would be good for him." Heather thrust the damask rose into a slender vase and placed it on the clock shelf. "We'll keep this rose in the kitchen, mother. Mr. Joselyn might have a spasm if he should see it again; it would remind him of the canker that has eaten into his bachelordom. And you remember, mother dearest, you advised me to discourage him."

"But I didn't tell you to flay him alive, and I'd no idea you would be so zealous. You know there's no harm in Lote. He's got a kind heart. Poor fellow, I wonder what he'll do."

"So do I," returned Heather fervently.

CHAPTER XXII

THE Hamptonites were great travelers. Half the news in the Itemizer was about the jaunts away from the Valley.

In a busy and continuous game of tag, the inhabitants of Hampton visited relatives and friends in all parts of the state, over in New Hampshire, down in Connecticut; they took vacations in Maine; they made shopping trips to Boston and New York; they repeatedly spent week-ends with father's folks in Loopville or with daughter in Moon Hollow, and everybody reported a fine time. In the summer they alternated between Hampton Valley and their cottages at Tipping Rock Lake and Lake Tillamahassie. In the winter the more affluent toured to Florida or Colorado or California, or whizzed across to Europe to see how things were going and to collect a few notes that would do for a paper on "The World's Greatest Pictures" before the Mutual Culture Club. If you found a Hamptonite who did not travel, you discovered that he had rheumatism or heart trouble, or else that he belonged to those who clung to memories and deplored the slightest variation from the social order of three generations ago.

Grandma Davenway, for instance, disapproved of this restlessness and did not suspect that the increased facility of transportation was the only new factor.

The joy of visiting, of exchanging experiences, of finding out what other people were doing, had always been characteristic of the section, but formerly the area in which it might be exercised was greatly circumscribed, being gauged by the distance which the family horse could cover in an hour or two.

Heather, bearing an offering of a raspberry pie, unexpectedly encountered the full force of this criticism by announcing that she was to spend several days with the Judevines in their cottage at Tipping Rock Lake. Only the pie was wholly satisfactory. The old lady sniffed delightedly as she lifted the napkin and released the warm, spicy odor of the raspberries rising from the holes in the flaky crust that were supposed to simulate leafy branches.

"Your mother's a fine cook, Heather," she said, and her praise could not go higher. "But what are you sayin' 'bout a vacation? Vacation from what?"

"From work," laughed Heather. "Don't you know I've been working all the year?"

"Well, but good land! Ain't Hampton Valley a vacation from New York? Now you're goin' to Tippin' Rock to get a vacation from Hampton Valley. Where'll you go to get a vacation from Tippin' Rock?"

Heather laughed again, but made no defence.

Grandma Davenway picked up her thread lace and resumed her knitting. "I don't understand the times," she sighed. "They ain't much like they was when I was young. When we went away from home, it was just for the day."

"I don't see how you managed," said Heather, puzzled. "You didn't have any telephones. How did

you know whether you'd find people at home, or whether somebody was planning to come to see you?"

"We managed very well," nodded her grandmother. "Folks ain't any happier with telephones. More newfangled things they get, the more they want, and the less time they got for things that's important. Why, way 'twas: You knew by the state of the weather whether it was a visitin' day or not. Except for the lowery days in summer, we done our visitin' mostly in the winter, 'cause the farm work was lighter then. If 'twas blusterin', you knew nobody'd come; but if 'twas pleasant, there was always a chance. You had to get started early to be sure you'd find folks at home—'bout nine o'clock, say; and if you didn't find the first family at home, you went on somewhere else. You didn't waste a day after you'd once planned to be gone.

"When I was a little girl, I used to watch at the window on a sunny mornin' in winter, and I was turrible excited when a sleigh turned into the yard. Mebbe it'd be Uncle Ben Gregory and Aunt Dolly and the three children. They'd bring in their freestones and take 'em out of the bags they were wrapped in; and before they started home, the freestones had to be he't up again. Aunt Dolly'd have a box with her fixin's in it—her cap and her best collar and her cameo pin and her muslin undersleeves; and when she'd put on those things, she'd look real stylish and be ready for the day's visitin'.

"Then mother'd begin to think what she'd have for noon dinner. There was always plenty. 'Course mother had stone jars of pickles—sweet and sour—and lots of jars of fruit and preserves, and the pork barrel was always full. There'd be frozen sausage and beef in

GRANDMA DAVENWAY DISAPPROVED OF RESTLESSNESS AND VACATIONS.

the oat bin, and frozen mince pies in the outside pantry. And there was dried pun'kin and bushels of fresh apples in the cellar, so she could make more pies if she wanted to, or apple dowdy mebbe. We always had a big meal and we'd hear everything that was goin' on."

"Think how hard your mother worked that day, though," put in Heather, with her mental eye on the strenuous task of feeding the boarders at home.

Grandma Davenway thrust her needle into a new row of stitches and smiled placidly. "Mother had to step spry, of course, but she was earnin' a day of rest doin' it. 'Cause in a month or two we'd go to visit Aunt Dolly; and then it'd be mother that'd take her box of fixin's and Aunt Dolly that'd be steppin' spry. It was turn about, and all come fair in the end."

"I'm sure it was very pleasant," commented Heather politely, "but I think it's wonderful to get out in the country and live in the open air and listen to the birds and enjoy the trees."

"Huh!" declared Grandma Davenway. "You don't have to go away from home to get those things. Ain't Hampton country? And you can hear the birds sing while you're doin' your housework. As for air, I always get plenty. I have my window up in summer; and in winter I open my bedroom door into the cold parlor, so I get all the air anybody needs."

Heather's dark eyes crinkled with amusement. 'It isn't like being out of doors, Grandma dear. I love to lie on the ground and look up into the trees and out over the water. I could be happy for hours that way."

The old lady looked over her spectacles, giving the girl an anxious scrutiny. "I wonder if you ain't bilious, Heather. It ain't healthy to feel so languid as that."

Heather smiled at her gayly. "Don't you love trees?"

"Love 'em? 'Tain't seemly to talk of nature that way. I like trees. Of course. We always had two good sugar groves and some big elms in the pasture and a coupla apple orchards, but didn't nobody lie 'round on the ground just lookin' at 'em. We had work to do. Besides, what would you stare at 'em for? After you've once seen 'em and know they're there, that's all, ain't it?"

"Sometimes it is," admitted Heather vaguely, and she made no attempt to bewilder the old lady by advocating an unpractical attitude toward nature.

Heather compromised with her conscience about leaving her mother at home by thinking of the real vacation they were to have together before long and by getting a woman to help a few hours each day while she was gone.

Tipping Rock Lake was only eight miles from Hampton, and all summer the Judevines, like many other citizens, went back and forth between their home in the Valley, and their cottage by the water. The lake was at the northern base of Hemlock Knob and had been named for a huge boulder dropped by one of the glaciers that had overrun the state in prehistoric times. The Judevine cottage, one of a dozen scattered through the silver birches that outlined the shore, was large and well furnished, with wide screened porches, and a boat landing of its own.

Heather gave herself up to a carefree week. She forgot all her irritation over small-town ways; she forgot the frenzied hours of cooking and housework; she even forgot the stand she had been making for a

wider, more independent life which would separate her forever from the restrictions of Hampton Valley.

She was very fond of Mrs. Judevine, a woman of culture and extensive reading. Kitty, a slender blond girl with large blue eyes, who lived on excitement, had been an intimate playmate of her childhood. There was therefore no false effort toward sociability.

Friday night Mr. Judevine and Wylie Chamberlain arrived in their cars, bringing a party of young people to spend the week-end. Heather was amazed to find how close Wylie kept to her all the evening—and how pleasant it seemed.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE next morning it was cool, but the sunshine was dazzling on foliage washed fresh by a storm. By afternoon the ground was comparatively dry again, and the young people took the trail that wound up Hemlock Knob—a shady trail, spattered with sunshine that sifted down through the maples and beeches. Higher up, there were hemlocks and balsams and spruces, although the firs were thicker on the slope toward Hampton; and at the top an occasional stunted mountain ash or straight birch found a precarious foothold.

They strolled lazily, brushing aside the wide, fat leaves of dogwood that reached out into the path; they prowled around fallen tree trunks for fungus, some white, and some brilliant yellow or scarlet; they gathered mountain ferns and maidenhair and rattlesnake plantain and bunch-berries.

The trail was crossed and recrossed by a small stream, tumbling over the rocks now and then, and scolding noisily along its bed of stones. Heather found Wylie Chamberlain always at hand to help her over this stream. He did it unobtrusively and naturally, as if it were his business to look out for her; and again she marveled that it seemed to her natural, too.

Once she slipped in the wet moss, flung out one hand

to catch at a branch, missed it, and plunged. Wylie turned in time to see her predicament and to catch her before she fell.

"Oh, I'm so helpless!" she gasped, laughing shakily.

Wylie took her hands and looked down tenderly into her eyes. "Darling, you know I want to help you always—if you'll let me."

They stood a moment without moving, breathless, gazing deep into each other's eyes.

"Heather, will you marry me?"

Her lips parted, but for some reason they formed no word. Then they curved in a faint smile. He drew her closer.

Kitty's voice rang excitedly down the path. "Aren't you coming? We're all waiting for you."

"Confound them!" muttered Wylie. "Do they have to watch us every second?"

But as Kitty ran into view, calling with anxious insistence, they shouted that they were coming—and followed. They were not alone again during the afternoon.

After supper they walked out together to a big flat rock at the end of the lake and scrambled to the top of it, where they could look out over the water and watch the moonlight on the trees.

"Happy, little girl?" he asked softly.

"I—I don't know."

"Don't know!" he exclaimed. "That isn't the right way for an engaged girl to talk."

"But, Wylie," she protested, hardly pleased by his assurance, "I don't know whether we're engaged or not."

"You don't!" His voice was sharp with alarm. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said slowly, "that it depends upon what you plan to do. You see, I—I want to be happy. I can't tell you how much I want to be happy. Probably it's because I'm selfish, but I don't believe—honestly I don't believe—that I could care enough for any man to be happy with him unless our ambitions were the same. And I'm afraid—well, you seem to be happy in Hampton Valley."

"Great heavens!" he burst out, with enormous relief. "You gave me a terrible scare. If that's what worries you, let me tell you that I'm satisfied with Hampton Valley for a while—for a while only. I'm making pretty well here, and I figure that in two or three years I'll have saved enough so that I can go to some city and have the right send-off to make a bigger start in the law. I've no intention of staying in Hampton after I feel that I'm ready for the city. Believe me, no! Does that suit you?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, it does," she said emphatically. "But then—there's one more thing. You told me once that you had other interests besides the law. Would you mind telling me what they are?"

He seemed surprised for a moment. Then he laughed. "Why, of course I'll tell you. As fast as I accumulate money, I lend it, just as the banks do. I had no intention of making it sound like a secret. It's as open as the day."

Heather was relieved. It seemed that she had taken his chance reticence with too much seriousness. Following the methods of a bank—there was nothing

objectionable about that. She hardly knew what she had feared; but in the reaction from her vague misgivings, she was wholly at peace and wholly satisfied.

"Any other doubts?" he asked, with indulgent tenderness.

She looked up into his face, distinct as a cameo in the moonlight. She liked its leanness, the set of the head, the firm clearness of jaw and chin. Now that her questions were blotted out, she was thrilled with pride in him, thrilled with the magnetism of his strength and nearness.

"No. No doubts," she breathed.

"Darling—darling only girl!" With his arm about her, he chided her affectionately for not trusting his methods and his ambitions, and she admitted her foolishness so naïvely that together they laughed all barriers out of existence. They planned a beautiful, glowing future, with an optimism ineffably heightened by the calm grandeur around them. Tipping Rock Lake glistened and shifted softly under the moonlight, as if it were frosted with silver. The white trunks of the birches gleamed like candles at the edge of the water. The evening hush was broken only by the distant croaking of frogs in a swamp.

This calmness, this beauty, erased all the perplexities of the last few weeks. Under the spell, Heather felt her courage immensely strengthened. Even life in Hampton Valley took on a glamour. She could be happy there—that is, for a time, as Wylie had said—so long as she did not have to sacrifice her ambition for a wider life later on.

She felt that she was perfectly, blissfully happy.

The more she thought it over afterwards, the more sure she was that this man who belonged to her native town was the one who would make her happy always and help her to realize her visions. How fortunate she was that she had not married the wrong man! Twice she had hesitated on the very brink of doing it. Once she had even been engaged for a few hours, and then she had broken the engagement in a wild panic when she had looked the future straight in the face and realized that some momentary madness had taken away her judgment.

How thankful she was that she had been saved from that madness!

The next morning Wylie took her back to Hampton in his car, and they told each other how blissfully happy they were and how wonderful it was to be alive in this gorgeous world that was brilliant with sunshine and drenched with sparkling dew.

They planned about the house that they would build in Hampton Valley; planned also that they would sell it in two or three years—because, in spite of Mrs. Davenway's experience, it was always possible to sell if one waited a little.

"And then for the World!" Wylie summed up with a wide gesture.

"Then for the World!" breathed Heather ecstatically.

She told her mother all about it as soon as she reached home. Silently Mrs. Davenway took her into her arms and kissed her. Heather looked up in wonder.

"Aren't you glad, mother? You haven't said you're glad."

Mrs. Davenway smiled at her lovingly. "You know

I'm glad of anything that makes you happy, dearest."

Heather was vaguely disappointed. "I thought she'd be more enthusiastic," she reflected wistfully. "But maybe she will be—when she gets used to it."

CHAPTER XXIV

BOOTH RANSOME swung his red car out of Checker Street and purred smoothly down through the village. At the corner of Railroad a gust of wind lifted his hat. With a quick gesture he jammed it on again.

"Darn' windy hole!" he muttered. "But never mind!"

He was in too high spirits to be easily ruffled. He felt himself a conqueror; and although the victory was small, it had for him an absolute value. At last he had conquered Mrs. Davenway. He had been crafty and deceitful and treacherous, and as a result he had broken her resistance. She had accepted his terms on the river property, and he had made the first payment. He stood to make four thousand dollars on the deal.

It was not a large amount, even to Booth Ransome, but it represented something besides money. It was a proof of his acumen and diplomacy and it gave him a feeling of power which no commissions could possibly give him. He would have worked months longer for the sake of putting through any scheme after he had once started it. And on the side he had sold a number of Comet cars—all black ones, he recalled with a chuckle. His was probably the only colored car in Spinooski County. Hampton regarded it as out of

taste, but there had been undeniable advertisement in the flagrancy which had elicited outspoken disapproval from the conservative. The car itself was a good one, and Hampton had acknowledged that.

He took the road above the river, intending to go down through the property and take some pictures to send to the men whose agent he had been. It seemed to him almost unbelievable that Mrs. Davenway had not suspected his exclusive interest in the water power. He fancied the daughter had penetrated it, and for a time he had feared that she would foil his plans, but her opposition had suddenly faded. He didn't know why, but he divined that it was due to her mother's superior firmness. Mrs. Davenway had a quiet sort of force, somehow.

He had been given five months in which to get the power, and there would be several days to spare after the final payment was made. The company that was to start the box factory would not wait longer; if he had failed, they would have opened negotiations themselves or searched for another location. It was the merest chance that they had given him the opportunity; it had come about only through their own bad luck. For months they had made overtures for a site farther down the river, but ultimately the owner had refused unaccountably to sell a property for which he had no personal use. They had interpreted this as New England obstinacy, and they had been wary about encountering it again. That had been Ransome's chance.

Through his acquaintance with one of the stockholders, he had volunteered to secure for them a power site at Hampton Valley; and after they had quietly

investigated the depth of the fall and the contour of the land, they had agreed to pay five thousand dollars for the property any time within five months. He was at liberty to make what he could on that basis. Also, on his own initiative, he had secured several options on tracts of timber land on the mountains, hiring the Davenway horse to take him over the rocky, ill-kept roads which his car could not traverse. But he felt sure it would be easy to sell those options to the company when the factory was established. On the whole, he was hugely satisfied with his own cleverness.

He left his car at the side of the road, picked up his camera, and started into the burned woodland. It was the first time he had been there since the fire, but there was no longer any point in concealing his interest. The land was practically his. He had made the first payment. What he particularly wanted today was to take some pictures of the falls, now wholly unobstructed by trees and shrubs.

It was difficult walking over the uneven ground, strewn with charred limbs and sticky with ashes that were wet from recent rains. It was a desolate scene: the ragged gray debris, out of which rose burned sticks that had once been young, vigorous trees. Scattered through this second growth were a few large beeches and maples, now denuded of branches and become stark, mutilated shafts, roughly crusted with black. The wind, stronger here near the river, soughed through this desolation and stirred the wreckage into lonesome, creaking sounds.

Ransome came to the top of the hill and began the descent, slipping on the steep slope and recovering

himself with quick compensations. But he had no thought of danger till a sudden crackle struck his ears. Fear ran through his being like an electric shock. That sound was too near . . . and the wind . . .

He sprang forward on the wild impulse to get away. His foot caught on a root. He threw out both hands in the instinct to save himself, but on the steep side-hill, that action only plunged him forward. He fell headlong. . . . Soft blackness closed him in.

It was an hour afterward that Jonathan Hydackett, from the other side of the river, made out the form of a man sprawled on the burned hillside. On his detour through the village to reach the spot, he spread the alarm. A score of men sprang into their cars and followed him.

They found Booth Ransome alive but unconscious, pinned down by a half-burned tree that had been loosened by the wind. It had fallen across his arms, evidently striking his head a glancing blow.

They carried him back to Mrs. Davenway's.

They didn't ring. Nobody spoke. They moved under the spell of calamity. Mrs. Davenway saw them coming and had no need to question. She opened the front door and led the way upstairs, tearing open the bed with one fling. Ransome's arms were crushed, and he was still unconscious.

Mrs. Davenway stepped into the hall, where Heather was waiting. "Surgeon," she said briefly. "Get Dr. Furlin. Martin next!"

Heather bounded down the stairs. How strange life was! She had thought she hated Booth Ransome;

but now that he lay up there dumb and mutilated, he was only a weak human being. As she raced to the telephone, her brain was full of horror, and her heart was full of pity.

CHAPTER XXV

BOOTH RANSOME in health, swinging his red car through the shady village streets, had made comparatively little impression in the town; but Booth Ransome maimed and helpless, immediately changed the whole thought and conduct of Hampton Valley. The news of his mishap spread everywhere with astonishing dispatch. Railroad Street and Lower Main were speckled with knots of men, comparing notes and speculating about future developments. On Elmwood Avenue and Hobart and in every other residence section, women hung over porch rails or collected on front walks, to be joined briefly by anyone who chanced to be passing. These pedestrians, who could not be permanently deflected from their destinations, were constantly dipping into yards, coming out again, and dipping into others, like bees sipping from many flowers.

On Checker Street the attitude was at once more tense and more attentive. Various curtains strayed from the evenness of their edges to form lace-rimmed portholes. On the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Davenway's, children gathered in a subdued group—little girls in gingham dresses and pigtails, little boys in overalls and dusty shoes—watching, nudging one another, scarcely speaking in audible tones. Occasionally some youngster came racing down the street to

join them. Having been detained by some domestic task or an errand in another part of the village, he had missed the earlier thrills; but as soon as these had been communicated to him, he became one of the group in silent watchfulness.

Tirelessly they stood there, their round wondering eyes alert for the slightest movement in the Davenway house, each mind apparently not functioning but serving merely as a tabula rasa, ready for the registering of impressions. Heather, glancing from the window to see if the doctor were coming, was reminded of the patience of the spider, self-paralyzed before the chance of a fly.

Dr. Furlin came first. He examined Ransome, shook his head, but magnanimously suggested consultation with Dr. Martin.

Half an hour later, Dr. Martin arrived, and the children broke ranks—quietly, like the caving-in of a sand pile—to let him pass. Two doctors' cars in front of one house at one time! It gave staying power to little legs, lifted small eyelids higher from solemn eyes, sharpened the receptivity of young minds, starved for normal excitement. The second tier of watchers —those behind the lace curtains—enlarged their peepholes with reckless fingers, hoping some things from personal observation, and hoping more from various small representatives on the sidewalk who would return home primed with interesting details.

Dr. Furlin said amputation. Dr. Martin, with a touching compliance, looked very wise and said by all means.

Ransome had not recovered consciousness. The doctors could therefore discuss his condition without leav-

ing his room, but they withdrew to one side and talked in low tones.

"Don't you think you could wait a little?" protested Mrs. Davenway in distress. "He might——"

"Slim chance!" declared Dr. Furlin, with an impatient wave of his firm, plump hand. "They're smashed—bones splintered. But I think we can save him if we take 'em off at once. He'd be——"

"No," interrupted a terrible voice. "No! NO!"

Profoundly startled, they wheeled toward the bed. Ransome, straining to lift himself, but held by the drag of his helpless arms, was glaring at them with a frenzy of terror in his black eyes. Desperate revolt blazed up behind his gray pallor. His face was like a madman's in its intensity. But only for a moment! His head fell back heavily on the pillow. It was as if his spirit, hearing the peril that threatened, had pushed through the wall of unconsciousness long enough to strike this one stiletto-like blow in self-defence. Or so it seemed to Mrs. Davenway.

When the conference was continued, this time in the hall, she took up the fight that Booth Ransome had been obliged to surrender.

"You give him some slight chance to pull through without amputation, of course," she began, half in question.

"I don't deny that it's possible," replied Dr. Furlin cautiously, "but I consider it very doubtful."

"Nevertheless," she went on earnestly, "so long as a shadow of a chance exists, it's his right to take it if he chooses."

Dr. Martin sniffed. "He didn't know what he was saying."

"I think he knew very well," contradicted Mrs. Davenway gently. "He heard, and he decided; and I'm going to carry out his wishes."

Dr. Furlin shrugged. "In that case——"

Mrs. Davenway took the sentence from him. "I shall send for Dr. Partlow."

"Very well," assented Dr. Furlin with forced amiability, "although it would seem to me simpler to send him to Sunny View, where he would have every attention and——"

"He will have every attention here," interposed Mrs. Davenway, with unusual crispness.

"Oh, undoubtedly, but——" Dr. Furlin let it go at that. He had worked once or twice with Dr. Partlow, who was an eminent surgeon of Broomfield, but his established affiliations were elsewhere.

Mrs. Davenway went on downstairs.

"Heather," she said briskly, "will you please go over to Mrs. Judevine's and ask her to telephone Dr. Partlow? She knows him, and my name would mean nothing to him. I want him to come at once and bring a nurse who can stay a week. Have her tell him what the trouble is and explain that I'll guarantee the fee."

Heather, already at the door, paused on the last phrase. "Mother," she gasped, "how can you do that —about the fee? You don't know whether Mr. Ransome will——"

"I'm not counting on him at all, Heather. I've got money, now that he made that payment on the land. I'll pay the fee."

"Mother! Why, you wouldn't use your own money unless——"

"Dear child, I'd use anything I've got to help a human being in distress. So would you. And do hurry. It's better for you to go over than to telephone."

Heather skipped out of the yard, scarcely aware of the delicious flurry she caused among the small spectators, rewarded at last by action after a considerable stretch of dull waiting. Heather was realizing that again she had encountered that naïve side of her mother's nature with which she was not wholly in sympathy, which she even deplored. Up to a certain point they agreed. Despite her aversion to Booth Ransome, Heather was sorry for him now and would do anything that she could to relieve him. But the Davenways were not in financial position to assume the expenses attendant upon summoning eminent specialists. There was no reason to feel sure that Booth Ransome might not repudiate a bill which he had not authorized; his record so far had not been of the sort to inspire confidence.

Not that it would have been Heather's disposition to hesitate if this had been the only way to obtain skilled attention! But Dr. Furlin was a good physician and a successful surgeon; people predicted a brilliant future for him. His judgment might be as good as anybody else's, for all they could tell.

"It isn't as if we had plenty of means," Heather told herself, as she rounded the corner of Black Cherry Avenue. "But that's all the ready money mother has in the world. Poor dear! I wish her feelings didn't run away with her head."

This was, she knew, the secret of the difference which she had felt many times between herself and her mother

during the few weeks that she had been at home. It made her understand how much her training and her advantages had done for her; without them she would be at the mercy of impulses as much as her mother was. To control those impulses, to put them to the test of one's rationality, and not to act until that rationality had passed judgment—all this was the service which training and deliberate self-determination performed for the individual. This was what they had accomplished for her, Heather Davenway; and because action for her was not at the mercy of impulse, she could not but feel that she had advanced from her inherited tendencies; she had lifted herself out of her environment; she had become an individual in the real and free sense. She hated herself for thinking of her mother as simpler and more irrational. She would not have used the terms even in her own thoughts, but the comparison was there in the vague apprehensions which one tolerates when sharp phraseology would be abhorrent.

Dr. Partlow promised to drive up to Hampton that evening. But it had taken an hour to get into communication with him.

When Heather reached home again, she found everything different. The doctors, having set Ransome's arms and given Mrs. Davenway instructions, had departed, breaking the spell for the little group on the sidewalk. The children scattered and straggled away, and their elders forsook the seclusion of lace curtains and came forth into the open.

That is to say, the neighbors began dropping in at the Davenways's. It was not considered good form in Hampton Valley to call until after the doctor had

gone, the first conference being sacred to the family circle. But the doctor's going marked the neighbors' coming. Today the more formal wandered up to the side door; the intimate vaunted their status by taking the longer route around the house and trailing into the kitchen. They all asked, "How is he?" in a stage whisper, supposed to be suitable for the harrowing occasion, and they supplemented solicitude with offers of assistance which covered a complication of motives.

Heather felt that it was a frantic afternoon. Ever since the accident she had been running here and there on demands for hot water, cold water, basins, tumblers, spoons, the errand to Mrs. Judevine's. It was late and the supper not started. It was growing cold, and that meant a fire in the furnace. And here were Mrs. Hoyt, Mrs. Tripe, Tillie Spinkett, Miss Nancy Hobart exuding majestic sympathy. Others were coming in at the gate.

"Oh, Mrs. Giddings——" She seized upon that lady, who had just returned from pleasurable excursioning that spread ghastly details among a select circle of friends—— "Oh, Mrs. Giddings, won't you please entertain all these people? Take them into the sitting-room and thank them for coming—and everything."

Mrs. Giddings accepted the congenial commission with a gracious condescension. "I will do my outermost," she assented.

Heather flew down cellar; stuffed paper, kindlings, and a little coal into the furnace. She left the drafts open and flew back upstairs.

Cula Clare Leathers stood in the middle of the kitchen, putting on her big apron.

"I've come to help," she said quietly. "What can I do?"

"Bless your thoughtfulness!" cried Heather, deeply touched. "I'm in an awful mess. We're to have salmon croquettes, and I haven't got them ready. And biscuits! I can't even recall how much baking powder you put in. We were to have the canned blueberries for shortcakes, but we can serve them as sauce, can't we? Do remind me to shut off that furnace in five minutes. And if you ask me how he is, I'll scream."

Miss Leathers smiled. "I don't ask questions when I'm cooking." Already she was in the pantry, getting out spoons and flour and a mixing-bowl. She was an expert cook and she had the faculty, characteristic of the New England woman, of going into another woman's pantry and taking charge as if she were at home.

Heather was genuinely appreciative—and also surprised. Her impression of Miss Leathers so far had been of an ineffectual, self-effacing woman, to be pitied and helped. But certainly that estimate would not hold for this deft little creature who shaped biscuits with ease and dispatch, filled tarts without being told where the jelly was, remembered the furnace drafts, set the table as if she had done it every day, cut the cake, and had the tea brewed on time.

In the comparative lull of serving the supper, a strange thought flashed into Heather's mind: Wherein had her training helped her this afternoon? There was her mother upstairs in that terrible, darkened room. She had managed this emergency with a firm hand, and with none of the flurry and false moves that had hindered her daughter. There was Miss Leathers,

shy and self-depreciative, without whose clear-headed planning the supper would not yet be ready.

It was odd that these two women had carried through their part of the afternoon with more poise and efficiency than Heather had brought to hers. Momentarily it shook her faith in that new individuality which she believed she had evolved from the self that heredity had given her. But surely in matters that were personal or involved deeply personal issues, her training and her independence of surroundings would assert themselves. Oh, surely!

It was nine o'clock when Dr. Partlow arrived.

CHAPTER XXVI

MRS. DAVENWAY was tremendously relieved when Dr. Partlow walked in, accompanied by a small dark woman with keen eyes and an assured manner. About them both there was an atmosphere of experience and efficiency that was most grateful to Mrs. Davenway, who was acutely aware that she had undertaken a considerable responsibility. Intuitively she felt that she could safely pass over that responsibility to this calm, firm man whose quick brain and skillful fingers had given him a state-wide reputation.

He had brought a small bag and a portable X-ray machine. But if Mrs. Davenway had hoped for unqualified optimism, she was swiftly disappointed.

"I can't promise anything," was Dr. Partlow's verdict, after he had made a preliminary examination. "It's a compound fracture of both arms, and it's beyond anybody's predicting whether the flesh will heal or not. Apparently he has a good constitution——"

"Yes," broke in Mrs. Davenway, "yes, he has—and will power. All he's said since it happened was that he couldn't—couldn't—lose his arms. You understand," she continued, with a painful flush, "you understand that your fee is to be the same——"

Dr. Partlow's glance traveled briefly over the plain furnishings and came back to Mrs. Davenway. She

had been too occupied to think of her appearance. She was still wearing her gingham morning dress; but her face had a glow that called back, through her weariness and the ravages of care, a reflection of the remarkable beauty that had been hers when her life had been easier. There was something compelling about her compassionate earnestness.

His grave eyes softened. "It's not the fee that I'm worrying about," he said gently, "but only the possibility of gangrene. Nevertheless, I wouldn't cripple any man if I thought he had one chance in a million. We'll watch him and let him try it."

The nurse had attached the X-ray machine, and Dr. Partlow began throwing the searching ray into the mutilated arms. He found that the local doctors had not properly set the bones. So he re-set them, verifying each step by the faithful X-ray, ultimately checking the whole process by carefully developed shadow pictures. It was slow, painstaking work, but not complicated by the need of an anæsthetic, Ransome being still unconscious.

When the arms were at last in splints, Dr. Partlow straightened with a smile that acknowledged the limitation of human effort. "I've done all I can do," he said. "Now it's up to Nature."

He left early the next morning, and the household settled into a makeshift routine, subdued by the presence of the desperate, silent struggle in the sickroom, but relieved of the immediate burden by the thoroughly competent nurse. With returned consciousness, Ransome came back to excruciating pain; but his splendid reserve strength and his roused will power seemed to

fend off the morbid dangers which the local doctors had gloomily predicted.

Days passed; and the nurse, watching with a practiced eye, found no reason to send for Dr. Partlow.

In the meantime Heather's engagement had become known by the simple village process of being "noised about." Hampton was zealous in arranging showers for prospective brides, but an announcement party was rare, perhaps because it was difficult to keep anything secret in the Valley long enough to make preparations for announcing it.

The news was highly pleasing to Hampton, which put itself on record as considering the alliance an eminently suitable one. Of Wylie Chamberlain it thoroughly approved; of Heather, it had been somewhat uncertain. For eight years she had deliberately affiliated herself with other sections, and that in the full knowledge that the dandy little town of Hampton Valley existed and had the first claim on her loyalty. Her protracted visit this summer was therefore a period of probation, at the end of which she might have tried everybody's patience by electing to rejoin some frenzied throng that had lost the simplicity and beauty of social order which are enjoyed in the country town, where "everybody knows everybody, and there's some satisfaction in living."

But now Heather had declared herself. Her head had not been turned by the wild freedom of the West or the pomp of Gotham; she was a young person of poise and discernment who had detected the falseness underneath the glitter and knew enough to stay by the real. She was to be a part of Hampton. The fact that a rising young man like Wylie Chamberlain, who

"had only to crook his finger, by gorry," had selected her as his future wife, was in itself an overwhelming commendation; and when it was supplemented by the reflection that Heather would now be as much a Hamptonite as anyone else, it melted the trace of potential frostiness which had been suspended in Hampton's manner. Heather was treated with striking cordiality; also with frank expressions of individual opinion. She was amused at the basis of approval which various citizens admitted.

"Well, Heth," commented Mrs. Lem Tripe in a high, nervous voice, fixing the girl with her faded blue eyes, "we're all glad you're showin' s' much sense. You can't do better'n to settle where you was born."

Heather smiled sweetly. One thing she had learned in the past few weeks was to smile more and say less, a policy which was rapidly advancing her social reputation.

"We are gratified not to lose you," purred Mrs. Weatherwax, her handsome face beaming with benevolent approval. "The Judge agrees with me that Wylie is a man of the future. I'm sure you were intended for each other."

In these round terms Mrs. Weatherwax bestowed the sanction of her family and the planets in general, but there was nothing to indicate that her subject was romance.

"What's this I heared, Heth?" quavered Jabez Mears, very old, very deaf, but convinced of his own diplomacy. "'Pears you've roped in a likely young man. Good for you, Heth! And I guess your ma'll be glad to have you with her, now't she's lookin' over the brow of the hill. Huh?"

Heather gasped. Mrs. Davenway having reached the advanced age of forty-five, Mr. Mears had all Hampton behind him in judging her as well started on the down grade. But Heather, fresh from haunts which have substituted a criterion of vitality for New England's stock of almanacs, was not prepared to think of her mother as an old lady.

"Hey? Wha's that you say?" It was evident that Jabez Mears expected a reply to his effort. His large floppy ear was patiently cupped for a rejoinder.

"Yes," shouted Heather in desperation, too bewildered to know what she was confirming.

"Eh-heh! 'S what I been tellin' 'em," chuckled Jabez, putting his seal to the intelligent conversation.

Grandma Davenway was satisfied but cryptic. "You got brains, Heather; I always suspected it. Can't no woman be happy if she's got to worry 'bout whether the bills'll be paid or not."

Daphy Giddings rolled her blue eyes in envy and admiration. "I hand it to you, Heather. You fish with a quiet line, but when you pull it in—— Gee, I'd like to know what you use for bait."

Mrs. Giddings for once agreed with her daughter, but expressed herself in far more chaste language. "You have made a preëminent choice in your financé, Heather; and I speak whereof I know, having had a mother's eye on the manly possibilities of Hampton. Besides, my current friendship with Mr. Brisbee, my attorney-at-law in Loopville, has raised the bar very high in my esteem."

With some dismay Heather noticed that every comment she heard was suggestive of a business arrangement and took no account of any personal attachment,

and yet her memory told her that this was merely in accordance with the custom of the village. Hampton assumed the deeper emotions, but rarely acknowledged them verbally, being restrained by the conviction that it was weak to "spill over." Many a family of children had been born, reared, and married into homes of their own without having heard a word of endearment addressed to them or exchanged by their parents, and yet all hands jogged along very comfortably. They simply didn't believe that love and affection have any function around in the open air. These may be the foundation of the home, but one doesn't put the foundation on top. Certainly Hampton didn't. When young people got "spoony," the Hamptonites smiled tolerantly and treated the matter as a phase, like measles or whooping cough. They knew it would pass. And it did—very quickly.

Hampton Valley had greater dignity than to spend itself on the softness of emotions. It was concerned with the serious side in the home as well as elsewhere. And the serious side of the home is the wherewithal to keep it running. Wylie Chamberlain gave promise of providing this wherewithal, and Hampton commended him for it. His methods were quiet but effectual, wholly in keeping with the ideals of his native town.

In fact, there would be less criticism about the commercialism of the age if other sections would only pause in their mad rush to catch the flying skirts of Finance, and model their methods after those of Hampton. They would learn many things which they manifestly do not suspect at present. Hampton, for instance, had wisdom about the speed of dollars. It knew the futility of chasing them. Why should you and the

eagle set off on a wild race, particularly when you are handicapped because the eagle started first? Wait a while; save your strength; enjoy life. The eagle will become tired in his flight and come back to you of his own accord. At least, that is the formula which Hampton had devised, and it seemed to work.

Business in the Valley was conducted with no degrading hustle, no crude zeal, no breathless haste, no sleepless nights of planning. Unbridled ambition was a vulgar superfluity; frenzy a word not yet coined. Hampton did not stalk big game; it waited in quiet dignity by the mouse-hole.

On no morning of the year could men be seen dashing out of their houses, hitching their coats over their nervous shoulders, and cutting across their well-kept lawns in a rush to get down town and unlock the office or open the store. Did Mr. Elias Leander Grobar refuse another dish of oatmeal and a liberal helping of creamed codfish and fried potatoes because the jewelry business might suffer if he dallied? Did Mr. Erastus Dingwall pass up the doughnuts on their third round because the wherewithal for next week's doughnuts might be forfeited if he were late in getting down to his notion store? Never! The business men of Hampton Valley had the charming security of knowing that their customers and patrons would wait for them. Those customers and patrons were bound in a network of obligations, and they were not likely to jeopardize certain interests of their own by withdrawing trade from men upon whom they were in turn dependent.

If by chance some seditious impulse should prompt any man to take back his patronage and bestow it

outside the established order of inter-obligation, he would dislocate the chain of which he was a part and would start in motion antagonistic forces which would ultimately wreak disaster upon his own head. If Dr. Harold Furlin stopped ordering fruit and canned goods from Mr. Abner Rider, one of his best patients, and transferred his favor to Bean Brothers, he might rest assured that all future sore throats, sprained ankles, and bilious fevers of all six members of the Rider family would automatically become the privilege of Dr. Orion Martin. Automatically, too, Mr. Rider would receive in exchange a portion of Dr. Martin's account, hitherto placed with Bean Brothers. Therefore Mr. Rider might safely help himself to a further graham muffin and mend little Johnny's traverse if he chose, before he set out for the fields of barter.

By virtue of system, then, Hampton Valley earned a living and made no fuss about it. There were no large enterprises except the foundry, the creamery, and the saw-and-planing-mill; but practically every man supported his family and kept his house painted and filled his cellar with coal every fall, and he did it unostentatiously, with a deftness that the city-dweller rarely achieves. It seemed as if the stores supported one another, buying and selling back and forth in a way that certainly kept money in circulation but would starve people to death in the cities, which have not mastered the magic that the small town understands and uses. A scoffing outsider might imagine that a specified amount of capital had been set apart for Railroad Street and Lower Main and that the storekeepers used it in a gigantic game of pitch-and-toss, dipping in, picking up a handful of currency, slinging

it at some fellow down the line; then receiving a handful that some other fellow had slung.

The machinery was really simple, though. The Caprons bought groceries from Bean Brothers, and Minnie Bean bought her best bedroom set and a new parlor carpet from Bill Capron. Zeke Gilman bought meat from 'Bial Pember; and 'Bial Pember bought cough drops and porous plasters and spring tonics from Jeff Cooper; and Jeff Cooper bought phonograph records and silver spoons from Elias Grobar; and Elias Grobar bought a lawn mower and a chicken-feeder from Zeke Gilman. The doctors bought from their patients; the ministers bought from their parishioners; and the merchants paid for health and the church. Lem Tripe shaved all of Railroad Street and Lower Main, and kept his conscience clear by scattering his patronage with studied impartiality.

It was a system that had many advantages. One of the most salient was that it precluded temptation to furnish change in window displays. If a man had jewelry to sell, he put some jewelry in the window and thought no more about it. When Styggles & Company got in a new lot of ladies' house-dresses, they put a pink one and a blue one and an apple-green in the window with a neat placard that read, "Latest Arrivals in Ladies' House Dresses." And there they stayed, by virtue of honesty. They were the latest arrivals, and they continued so to be until a new shipment came in. At that time, other house-dresses took the place of these; but the placard, being still as applicable as ever, was not changed at all.

Hampton's conception of advertising was based on absolute frankness and the beholder's indubitable priv-

ilege of drawing his conclusions for himself. Jeff Cooper maintained a legend in a side window which advised, "Read the Latest Books," but he did not go so far as to imply that there was any immediate connection between this suggestion and the dozen volumes which surrounded it. Bean Brothers's was a popular rendezvous for flies during the summer months, and the fact was scrupulously incorporated in the window display in a manner which was the highest triumph for honesty. Mr. Timothy Bean even placed a sheet of mucilaginous nourishment on each side of a cut watermelon and left the flies to take their choice in the full sight of all Hampton Valley.

There is no reason to believe that there was any inherent weakness in the pleasant interchange which constituted commercialism in Hampton, but there were outside agencies which increasingly threatened its integrity. One was the catering of the larger town to the small. It was now ridiculously easy to motor down to Broomfield and fill up the family car with the newest dress goods and the latest trimmings and a stock of groceries from some concern with scandalously low prices.

Another disturbing factor was that for the mere dropping of a post card any woman in Hampton might, and often did, receive a large, profusely illustrated catalogue from some Pears Podunk company and was thereupon lured to purchase money orders from Arad Plummer instead of distributing her allowance along Railroad Street and Lower Main, where by all claims of loyalty it belonged.

A third danger came even nearer and was more persistent. This was the invasion of some hustling mer-

chant from another section. The grocery known as the Help Yourself Cut Rate was an arch offender. It was one link in a chain of groceries that extended from Derby Line to Bellows Falls; it did not deliver; and it shaved off one cent or two cents or three, or sometimes ten, from the price of each article. Bean Brothers felt that they needed those cents in their business. They had had them heretofore without question, and they argued immediately that they were much abused and hard put to it. As Mr. Timothy Bean remarked: "Us in Hampton's gotta right to live, hain't we? I tell you, I got my opinion of these here fellers that's so smart, sailin' in and cuttin' prices. All they want is to get money outa Hampton, but they won't prove no addition to the town. You see!"

But as the proprietors of the Help Yourself Cut Rate had not yet been found wanting in response to all the town undertakings, the dark deficiencies of which Mr. Bean believed them capable, had not so far been declared. And in the meantime various thrifty housewives were seen to slink into the Help Yourself Cut Rate with their shopping bags, and the established merchants were plunged more and more deeply into martyrdom.

From the nature of these commercial encroachments, it may be seen that Hampton Valley's original system would have been entirely sufficient and satisfactory if it could have been left to itself. It was imperiled only because enterprise reached in from the outside.

CHAPTER XXVII

AFTER Grandma Davenway had refused the wistaria gown, Heather had thrust the box as far back on the shelf in her clothespress as possible, so that she was obliged to stand on a chair to redeem it. She had decided to offer it again—not to Grandma Davenway, but still to the Old New England, represented now by Cula Clare Leathers.

"I wish myself better luck this time," she said to herself, as she set forth. "In Jeanne d'Arc's day, they would have called this intention courage; in mine, they call it nerve."

The gown was only a detail in her plan, the real purpose being nothing short of temerarious. She proposed to deflect Miss Leathers's life from its present drab, uneventful course, and steer it toward change and adventure, invested reluctantly in the person of Mr. Zelotes Joselyn. She had been coerced into action by her mother's opinion, by Miss Leathers's evident wishes, and by Mr. Joselyn's highest good as viewed by a person young enough to believe in her own judgment. As she had told Zelotes, she had broached the subject to Cula many times. Not being satisfied with the result of these conversations, she was prepared for more drastic measures to-day.

Heather made no immediate reference to the gown when she had been ushered into the Leathers sitting-

room, although Cula Clare was absorbed by the question of clothes. She was ripping a blue serge dress, another bit of charity from her cousin in Baltimore and, as usual, not to be worn without the greatest amount of remodeling.

Heather, who had for days been trying all sorts of hints and artful suggestions without effect, was watching to-day for an opening to launch her scheme in words bold enough to be unmistakable. She found it in Cula Clare's repeated admiration for her caller's new ring. All Hampton admired it, as being sufficiently large and costly to augur a prosperous matrimonial venture.

"You ought to be wearing one yourself," Heather said abruptly.

"I! Oh——" Cula Clare was reduced to monosyllables and confusion.

"Yes. Why not? It's an easy thing to wear." She waved her hand whimsically, as if to show how light a matter the weight of a ring may be.

Cula Clare was speechless. There were probably words in her mind, but no sentences.

"Why don't you marry Mr. Joselyn?" Heather inquired, in as casual a tone as she could manage—which was not very casual, since this idea had become almost an obsession.

Cula gasped. Her hands jerked as if from a galvanic shock. She was pitiably flurried, not being accustomed to putting into speech the things which most occupied her thoughts. Through heredity and sectional environment, she maintained this tragic duality, having been taught that real womanhood is a matter of reserve rather than of expression. Physically and

mentally she showed the effect from generations of ingrowing feelings. She was an exponent of unexpression, of repression, of suppression, of consequent depression—in fact, she was suffering from the whole -pression family.

"I've got a very strong notion that you ought to marry Mr. Joselyn," Heather continued.

The pink of delicious embarrassment crept into Cula's pale cheeks. "Where—where did you get such an idea?" she gasped.

"Oh, I can't say." Heather flew from this question on the wings of evasion. "You haven't any objection to him, have you?"

"Why—why, I don't know's I have."

"On the contrary, you really like him, don't you?" pursued the inquisitor.

Cula Clare gulped painfully, as if she were trying to swallow a piece of misplaced anatomy in her throat. When she failed to come to the surface, Heather merely nodded and forged ahead.

"Well, then, why don't you marry him?"

Cula Clare was far beyond speech. Her work forgotten, she sat as if paralyzed, staring, growing pinker and pinker, the pupils of her eyes expanded with tremendous excitement. She admired Heather in a pathetic sort of guarded hero-worship, and it was the only factor that mitigated her shame in the present subject. She was shocked, even scandalized, and at the same time irresistibly fascinated. Heather made it sound so easy to change the whole tenor of one's life! Cula Clare would like to believe that it might be changed. Hating herself for her tacit repudiation of the standards held by the long line of ancestors behind

her, she still could not deny herself the joy of lending an ear to the tempter.

"I can tell you one reason why you aren't engaged to him," Heather volunteered with forced vivacity. "You aren't doing the things to capture him. You let him think you like him."

Then Cula was stung to speech. "But I—I do like him."

"You must make him think you don't."

Cula Clare's amazement plucked her from the throes of reserve. "But I wouldn't want him to think I didn't."

Heather hitched forward in her chair. "See here, Miss Leathers, you want him to like you, don't you?"

"Ye-es."

"Well, he won't if he thinks you care about him."

"Why won't he?"

"Men never do."

"Why don't they?"

"Good heavens," cried Heather, "I don't know. They're just made that way."

"Are they?" murmured Cula Clare, in a mixture of incredulity and regret. "How did you know about it?"

"I've watched 'em," replied Heather vaguely. "And I learned a great deal from a roommate in college. She had half a dozen men rushing her all the time."

"Half a dozen! My land! Did she care about 'em all?"

"Oh, no, she didn't care much about any of 'em. If she had, she couldn't have managed 'em abreast that way. But she was clever and knew all the tricks."

"It doesn't seem to me," ruminated Cula Clare

slowly, "it doesn't seem to me that I should want to use tricks."

"I don't think," smiled Heather, "that you are in danger of using too many."

Cula Clare seemed to be meditating on the problem. Her eyes strayed to the window; they became alert. She twisted her neck, as if watching some object. Heather, struck by her expression of sharpened unhappiness, looked out too.

Miss Nancy Hobart was passing. She was a stout, plain woman of fifty-five, haughty, self-assured, possessed of ample means and prominent in every village activity. What had Mrs. Davenway said? That money made the difference in Hampton's attitude toward these two women!

Heather's glance came back to Miss Leathers, who was rapidly finding a place in her affection as well as in her sympathy. It was evident that Cula Clare, caught in the vise of poverty, looked out of her bleak little box of a house at Miss Nancy Hobart, and wondered and suffered. It was like being in a social prison, Heather told herself savagely. Something must be done; she felt that more strongly than ever. She could not pass over a fortune to Miss Leathers, but there was one other key to her prison. She attacked the problem again and with more rabid determination.

"You see the main point, don't you, Miss Leathers? You've got to be wholly detached—make him think you don't care one bit for him."

"Oh, I wouldn't want him to think that," repeated Cula in renewed distress.

"He's got to, Miss Leathers. But only for a little while."

"How long?"

Heather bit a smile in two and bent desperately to the task of building up Miss Leathers's sophistication —a difficult undertaking because Cula threw out the bricks as fast as Heather could throw them in.

"I don't know how long. Probably a few days."

"It sounds awful queer, Heather. I—I'm afraid I'd lose him that way."

"My dear, you can't lose him till after you've got him. You're dealing with a man that's been spoiled and has to have his lesson."

" 'Tain't any wonder he's been spoiled," reflected Miss Leathers. "He so pop'lar—and everything!"

"Well, why shouldn't you be popular, too? You could be if you'd try."

Cula's delicate face took on a deeper flush, and the fires of potential vivacity began to brighten her expression. "I? I, be pop'lar?" she breathed.

"Certainly," asseverated Heather, with more emphasis. "You've got a lot of things to begin on. You'd be really pretty if you took a little pains. And you've got a far more distinguished family behind you than Mr. Joselyn has. I asked mother about it, and it seems she doesn't even know who his grandfather was."

Cula Clare took a deep breath and became almost complacent. "Yes, I can trace my family straight back for three hundred years—and it's an honorable line of folks, too."

Heather, finding that at last she had struck a fund of material out of which might be constructed some sort of ego for the self-depreciating little woman before her, deliberately evoked the prestige of the past to help her present plan. She knew perfectly well, how-

ever, that the chief effect of long lineage would be upon Cula Clare herself—not upon the village, which would be far more concerned with Miss Leathers's appearance and manner than with any tales of her antecedents.

The fact is that one hears little about ancestry in Hampton Valley—less than in some other New England sections, far less than in states that are remote from New England. In the West one frequently hears some naïve citizen pridefully announce that if he tugs at his family rope a trifle, he stirs the Mayflower at her moorings beside Plymouth Rock or wherever it was. One hears this so often, indeed, that it can be explained only on the supposition that the Mayflower must have carried an extensive steerage, the first-class cabins having long since been engaged for progenitors by an astonishing number of aspirants for genealogy.

But in Hampton Valley the worry about forbears has gradually dwindled into negligibility. There are individuals who keep the memory of their grandsires, but it is a private matter, of little interest to the community. It was true that Miss Leathers cherished the traditions of three centuries; and every spring and fall, when she cleaned her shabby house, she dragged out the hair-covered trunk from her closet and gloated over the brass buttons once flaunted by Great-grandfather Leathers, and over the white satin fan and the gray silk gown flowered in pink that had subdued the hearts of gallant gentlemen in knee breeches and ruffles. But she didn't talk about these treasures, because Hampton discounted them. Even if her ancestry had come down a straight and narrow way from the time of William the Conqueror, it would have been considered

a weak thing, after all, if it had not left her in position to repaint her house and buy a new fall coat from Styggles & Company.

More immediate heredity is much thought of as a means of tracing tendency to disease, the probability of moral lapse, and the reason for salient traits of disposition. It is no wonder that Polly Weatherwax is a quiet girl; her Grandfather Weatherwax was known as Few-word Judge. It should not surprise you that Lizzie Nelson "ain't all she should be." You remember what her mother was, don't you? Well, then! And if Percy Mink's cough hangs on two weeks longer than is usual with a hard cold, the neighbors recall what carried off his father and tell Altha Mink that she'd better look sharp, 'cause Percy's inherited, like's not. The frailties of the present are tacked neatly to the frailties of the past. The Ancestor has become the moulder of habits and the source of weaknesses, but is no longer a tower of strength against which his descendants may lean, and he no longer cuts the cards for the dealing out of social prestige.

Nevertheless, Cula Clare was essentially untouched by the modern modification. She belonged to the Old New England, which one occasionally finds in its original integrity—the Old New England that is the Land of the Past, in which gentle ladies go through life backward, nibbling daintily at tradition and memories, their transfixed eyes on the wraiths of revered ancestors. Each generation only presses deeper the footsteps of those who have gone before and traces again the details of a pattern long since set for its following. This posthumous tyranny of the ancestor is responsible for

the atrophied individuality of many New England women. Nothing but transplantation can rouse them, ordinarily, turning them about with their eyes to the Present or blinking before the incredible white light of the Future.

Vaguely Heather had apprehended this before; today she saw it clearly. Cula Clare could not be incited by modern ways and the experiences of modern people, because her vision was trained upon the paths of her ancestors. Understanding finally that the leverage must come out of the past, Heather deliberately sought it there.

"There must have been some belles in your family," she insinuated slyly.

Mentally Cula Clare embarked upon the quest for ancestral belles. And found some! She particularly expatiated upon Aunt Deborah Leathers, who, it developed, had been a sad minx in the days of hoops and chignons.

"Why, Aunt Debbie, she was turrible pop'lar. They say she broke hearts right and left. There was one man that she refused his suit, and he went into a decline and died of it."

"Think of that!" cried Heather, much encouraged. "I presume there isn't another woman in Hampton Valley who had an aunt with a certificate of popularity like that. You know the chances are that you inherited a great deal from Aunt Debbie, and that all you'll have to do is call it up. You must keep Aunt Debbie in mind, and it'll help you to act like her. Above all, remember to be cool and indifferent. Treat Mr. Joselyn as if you'd all but forgotten he existed. Make him think he doesn't compare with other men you

know. I've begun it for you. I've already told him that you don't care a fig about him."

"Oh, Heather!" All Cula Clare's new and artificial composure deserted her on the instant. She wrung her hands in distress. "Oh, Heather: You've lost him. You've lost him!"

"I have not," contradicted Heather sharply. "I've begun to get him."

"Oh, dear! Oh, didn't it make him awful mad?"

"Of course it did."

"Oh, dear, he'll never look at me again."

"Indeed he will, you silly! He'll look at you harder than ever, to see if I was right. And while he's looking, you get in some of Aunt Debbie's deadly work—and there you are!"

"Oh, no, I don't believe it," moaned Cula Clare. "Oh, dear, I wisht he wasn't mad."

Heather took a long breath and patiently began again. "It's the best thing that could happen to him. Now he's saying to himself: 'I wonder if that little snip was right. I wonder if Cula Clare really doesn't care about me.' And he's watching to find out. Then you come along and you're very indifferent and supremely happy without any Lote Joselyns at all. And presently he'll be saying: 'By gorry, Heather got the dope on it, all right.' And——"

"Oh—oh, you ain't even talking seemly," interjected Cula, thoroughly bewildered.

"Never mind details," beamed Heather, undisturbed. "As I was saying, he'll feel hurt and piqued next, and pretty soon he'll exclaim: 'Huh! So she doesn't care about poor old Lote, huh! Well, I'll show her. I'll make her care, in spite of herself. I ain't goin' to be

turned down this way—you betcha I ain't!' And then —well, don't you see how simple it is? Now another thing that you and I have to do is to make you look different."

"Diff'runt! Why do I have to look diff'runt?"

"To make a new impression—blot out the old ones. Same reason that makes a bird change his color scheme with the season. Monotony is fatal. But this is going to be easy."

Thereupon she proffered the wistaria gown, with an accurate account of its history. Cula was overawed by its beauty. She handled it softly, with a starved light in her eyes, taking the keenest sensuous delight in the fabric and the color. She could not believe that anything so fine was to be hers, and yet her New England thrift told her that so beautiful a garment must not go to waste; and this practical aspect of the æsthetic, combined with the fact that Heather was at this very moment wearing her own present of gold beads, forestalled any possibility of refusing the gift. She accepted it with the breathless wonder and ecstasy of a child.

"We can easily make it into an evening gown," Heather proclaimed. "I've planned it. You see, there's a silk slip of the same color, and we'll use that to change the front and make a sash. This chiffon we'll drape into a partial tunic."

With the romantic objective in abeyance, they worked out these alterations; then turned to the blue serge, a problem worthy of a higher-mathematician. It seemed that Cula's cousin in Baltimore was a lady of generous proportions who developed shiny places in

important sections of her gowns. Moreover, those sections were short where Cula most needed length.

"I always have to piece everything, and piece it," she sighed, "and then cover up the piecing with some-p'n extra."

Herein lay the secret of her fussy appearance, Cula proceeding upon the simple assumption that the public would find ruffles more acceptable than seams.

During the planning on these two gowns, Heather continued her tutelage, by way of making the impression ineradicable. Particularly she strove to utilize Cula Clare's slavish copying, deflecting her from the precepts of her more melancholy ancestors toward the gay and giddy career of Aunt Deborah.

The rays of the afternoon sun had considerably lengthened when Heather emerged again into the streets of Hampton, an exceedingly frazzled young person, upheld only by the hope that she had made progress.

"That's the hardest work I ever did," she told herself, as she trudged toward home and boarders. "I feel as if I'd been trying to turn a planet around and pin it in a new position. But if we pull this off, I shall know that anything is possible—anything!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

CLIFTON STANLEIGH opened his eyes after an interrupted night and lay staring apathetically at his old wrinkled shoes, toeing out uncannily under the cane-seated chair. There had been a terrific thunder storm about midnight, and the rain had pelted on the tin roof over the kitchen veranda with the frenzy of a boys' tin-pan orchestra. Scarcely had it abated when the storm veered and came back, harder than ever. One could not sleep.

Clif had no need for an alarm clock. At half past six Mrs. Bailey paused in the stirring of muffin batter or the spanking of Timmy or whatever other household duty might be engaging her attention, picked up the "stove-lifter," and rapped smartly four times on the pipe that ran up through Clif's burrow, known importantly as the "kitchen chamber." It was a gable room, composed of a floor, upright walls about three feet high, and a top shaped like a wishbone. It was a roasting oven in summer, and a cheerless gray hole in winter. The Baileys had been managing the farm since the foreclosure the year before, and they occupied the entire house except this undesirable room.

Beginning another day made no appeal to Clif. "What's the use?" he thought gloomily. "What's the use?"

He yawned, stretched his arms above his head; then

dropped them abruptly. And a man who cannot follow a panther-stretch through to its finish of delicious relaxation is low in his mind indeed. Clif was near the depths.

He made a vicious grab for the patchwork quilt and tossed it back. As he swung over, there was a crisp rustling of corn-husks in the tick between the feather bed and the ropes of the ancient corded bedstead. His clothes were draped in picturesque carelessness over the gaunt wooden chair with the cane seat and the high, straight back. As he pulled them on, his eyes were drawn to the shadows of maple branches on the small patch of sunlight that came in through the low window and lay on the soft-wood floor. They were gay, hurrying shadows, playing back and forth, up and down, before the caprice of the high wind; but however they interlaced, they seemed to Clif to be writing one hideous word, Failure. That was the thing ahead; it was the only result his life had accomplished.

He wouldn't have rebelled against the long struggle if he could have reached the goal. He had stripped the farm; he had wrung reluctant dollars out of that wretched store; he had denied himself even down to necessities, and had sent to his brothers repeated checks in cheerful letters. But now his weapons were blunted, and the fight only partly won. Neither boy was really on his feet, and Clif was close to the wall. In a few days the farm would have to go; he could see no hope of redeeming it. There was his stock of goods, but there were also bills that must be met. He could begin over, of course. That wasn't what frightened him; it was failing his brothers when they needed all the help they could get. And it hurt to let this farm go.

It had been his mother's home. It would seem like striking apart a link that was dear.

He washed from the cheap white bowl that stood on a warped light-stand, set well out from the wall. All furniture was set out from the wall to avoid the slanted ceiling. Through the crack around the stove-pipe he could hear everything that went on in the kitchen. The click of the oven door was followed by a crash of crockery, and that by the brisk slapping of a youngster's ears with an open palm. Screams from Timmy Bailey! The heavy boots of Timmy's father stumped over the veranda and into the kitchen. Mrs. Bailey's shrill voice tabulated the destructive sins of the young Timmy. A scuffle through the back door! Scream! Bang! Vociferations transferred to the veranda and punctuated by the voice of ten-year-old Mamie Bailey urging with sharp reasonableness: "Shut up! Shut up, I tell you. 'F you yell so like hell, she'll spank you proper. Ninny, shut up!"

"Good Lord!" groaned Clif. "The darn' store is heaven compared with this."

An imperative call sent him downstairs. Breakfast of corn-meal mush, fried salt pork, fried potatoes, doughnuts and coffee, was enlivened by Mrs. Bailey's dependable irritation. Clif escaped as soon as possible and set off on the short walk into the village. The world was drenched from the storm. Pools of water stood in the hollows and ruts of the dirt road. There was a radical chill in the August air, and the wind was high.

For many months Clif had been facing financial trouble at close range, but he had managed to keep up a pretence of cheerfulness the greater part of the

time. To himself he admitted that Heather Davenway's engagement had been the final factor in his depression. He had had no life of his own so far, no chance even to think of a life of his own, but he could not remember a time when Heather had not occupied a devoted place in his thoughts.

When she had come back this summer, there had been no mistaking her real aloofness. She had been kind. Kind! There can be no greater cruelty, he thought bitterly. She had pushed him gently aside—and for Wylie Chamberlain. His reason told him that he couldn't blame her. He, Clif, was a failure. Hampton had no use for him, no patience with him, since he hadn't the potentiality of success. It was no wonder that Heather felt the same. Yet so long as she had been free, he hadn't felt entirely cut off. . . .

As Heather had divined, he did not admire Wylie Chamberlain. He acknowledged his ease of manner and his business shrewdness, however. Wylie was ambitious and he had the unqualified approval of the community. There had been hectic rumors about him at one period in his college career, but they were never substantiated and the Valley had generously forgotten them in the light of Wylie's increasing prosperity.

As Clif approached the Hotel Hampton, his face brightened. On the veranda stood a middle-aged man with the elusive air of the city in his dress and manner. He was Henry G. Nye from New Haven. He had been in town two days, and Clif had had several talks with him.

"Coming in to see you a little later," called Mr. Nye from the top step.

"Glad to have you come," returned Clif heartily. He went on into his store on Railroad Street opposite the Gorham Block, which was Hampton's only brick office building.

Mr. Nye turned back into the hotel in search of breakfast. Penetrating the Valley by means of Gard Billings's bus, he had registered here at once and asked casually for a room with bath. Received it, too. The Hotel Hampton, a clapboarded building painted salmon pink with red trimmings and shaped somewhat like a cow reclining for an afternoon rest, was in every way up to date. To be sure, it had been built in the happy days when guests were willing to take their turn at twenty-five cents per head; but when this idea of private baths struck the dense centers of population, the Hotel Hampton was quick to fall in line. In record time it was equipped with as much superfluous plumbing as the most pampered could desire. In each room destined for the ultra, a corner was fenced off with thin walls, perforated with assorted lead pipes, like pins stuck through a sheet of paper, each pipe finished off with porcelain—and there you had one of the most modern hostelries in Spinooski County, comfortable, convenient, at once home-like and hotel-like, two dollars a day and up.

Henry Nye was a handsome man, not yet fifty. He affected gray suits of fine weave; and when he topped his thick gray hair with a genuine Panama and sauntered out under the maples and elms of the village streets, he was an impressive addition to the picture. Railroad Street and lower Main had nipped large corners out of business hours for the purpose of discussing and deducing. Why should Mr. Nye, a man

of evident wealth, be staying at the Hotel Hampton when he had no relatives, no boyhood associations, no business interests, in the Valley? Particularly what could call him into the Stanleigh Merchandise Store, which he had been seen to enter many times? In spite of its self-complacency, Hampton did not expect anybody to come into town without a definite reason; neither did it intend that the reason should remain hidden.

The real truth would have been incomprehensible to the village—that Mr. Nye had come here to hunt up Clif Stanleigh. He had gone into the store on the afternoon of his arrival. Clif, advancing behind the counter, knew at once that this was not a customer. The stranger's scrutiny was unmistakably personal, and yet he called up no memory of previous acquaintance.

"You are Clifton Stanleigh," said the older man, as if he had convinced himself. "I am Henry Nye of New Haven."

Clif's expression changed to one of warm welcome. He came quickly around the scratched glass case of notions. "I am glad to meet you, sir," he said heartily.

They shook hands in silence and somewhat solemnly, as men do when they feel drawn toward each other. It seemed difficult for either one to find words.

"I know," Clif began at length, "I know from Mason how deep——"

Mr. Nye took the sentence from him. "Mason is—was—the closest friend my son ever had." His voice had wavered in the middle of the statement, but he finished it steadily.

Again they looked at each other without speech,

their thoughts occupied with the unusual bond between two college lads that had been broken by the death of Grantham Nye. In that moment Grantham's father and Mason's brother reached out toward each other in an intuitive friendliness which showed that there was a congeniality between the families, as there had been between individual members.

They did not refer to the subject again at that time. Clif led the way to his dingy old office; and during the few minutes before he was called back into the store by customers from the farm districts, they spoke of matters that were safely general.

They had had frequent talks in the two days that followed; and more from a silent mental interchange than from things that were said, they had come to understand each other with an insight that was fundamental. For the first time in years, Clif felt that he had found a friend, a man who could take his viewpoint and whose breadth of vision had kept him untainted by the arbitrary standards of success and failure which had barred Clif from the sympathy of Hampton.

Henry Nye impressed the village as a favored and self-sufficient individual, but in reality he was uprooted and restless, searching for distractions because he no longer had any interests. After the death of his wife five years before, he had centered every thought and every ambition in his only son, Grantham. When that son had died a year ago, it had been a devastating bereavement. There had been nothing left—absolutely nothing. It had been the end of Henry Nye's home life; he had sold the beautiful house because he could not endure the memories that met him at every turn. The making of money had long ceased to have any

attraction. Through inheritance and through his business, he had acquired more money than he could use. He still had shares in a large hardware company, which brought him good dividends, but made no real demand upon him.

After months of loneliness, of acute wretchedness, he had realized that if he were to go on, he must find an enterprise that would absorb his time and thoughts; he must set himself a task and pretend that its consummation was of vital concern. This meant that he must build up something, develop it, make it grow and flourish.

Exploring New England for an opening, preferably for some sort of manufacturing—different from the lines with which he was tiresomely familiar and yet not too technical for him to manage—he had come into Vermont as far as Broomfield. This had brought Clif Stanleigh to mind. He had made it a point to get thoroughly acquainted with Mason Stanleigh, to have him often in his home, to draw him out, to determine for himself the sort of chum his son had selected. And Mason, an ingenuous, open-hearted boy, had talked naturally and proudly of his brothers—of Ward, who was making the big struggle in New York, and of Clif, who was pegging at home and sacrificing himself that the others might have a chance. Mason had told this gradually, hardly realizing how much he revealed, not realizing at all that he was being cleverly probed; but as a result, Henry Nye knew the Stanleighs quite as well as the Stanleighs knew themselves, probably better.

Being near their home town, he had felt a sudden keen desire to hunt up Clif Stanleigh as a shadowy

link in the chain that bound him to his son. But he had not anticipated the strong partisanship which Clif and Clif's plight had roused in him. He could see that Clif was in a hole with this terrible store and that his own town was not helping him—seemed, rather, to be pushing him farther in, by lack of sympathy and encouragement as confessed naïvely by various citizens. Mr. Nye proposed to find out why.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHEN Mr. Nye had finished his breakfast, he redeemed his promise of coming into Clif's store for a chat. Clif was standing by a packing-box, stringing price tags into the buttonholes of a new lot of children's shoes. Mr. Nye came in with unusual briskness and advanced on Clif with a total absence of his customary calm.

"Clifton Stanleigh," he said, throwing out his arms in exasperation, "if you knew what Vermont granite was for, you'd tie a large boulder of it to your stock of goods and throw the whole thing into the Spinooski. Then you could get out into the world, where you belong. Why don't you do it?"

Clif looked up with a smile. If any Hamptonite had made this implied criticism of his stock, he would have resented it, because it would have been prompted by cynicism; but this man spoke out of unselfish understanding, which made a vast difference.

"I'd do it in a minute, Mr. Nye," he said, "if I thought it would stay under water, but the blamed stuff would come to the surface and I'd still have it to dispose of. I've no faith that the granite would stay with it very long."

Henry Nye's eyes traveled with keen appraisement from one item to another: these stubby shoes, with thick soles and too much dressing; overalls and aprons

that smelled of cheap dye; bolts of vivid calico; stacks of children's hats, jammed one on top of another, seemingly made by the million and intended to reduce childhood to a common level of uninteresting mediocrity.

"Seriously," he continued, "I'm going to tell you how much this junk distresses me. Can't we work out some way to dispose of it and get in a different line that you can make money out of?"

Clif was genuinely astonished. "Why, I make money out of this."

"Impossible! You couldn't."

"But I do."

Mr. Nye looked around again, shook his head. "You must fool yourself somehow. I don't believe you can make a turn-over in ten years."

Clif strung another pair of shoes and laughed. "I presume you never saw a stock like this before, Mr. Nye, but you never had anything to do with custom like mine, either. They're not so far apart as you might think. When Mrs. Ebenezer Lamson comes down from her ragged old farm to get some clothes for her grandson, she comes straight to me. She wants shoes that are thick and cheap and look it, and I have them." He stabbed the air with a pair in illustration. "She wants a little suit that feels stiff and thick, because those are synonyms of wear in her vocabulary, and I can give it to her. She wants a hat that can be dragged in the dust and forgotten in the turnip patch and look practically the same as when she bought it, and that's the kind I carry. I get the best goods I can to sell at prices that people will pay who haven't any taste and who believe that cheapness is economy and that color is preferable to quality. My stock

looks like the deuce, but I manage to keep it moving and I make a fair income out of it."

Mr. Nye was still incredulous. "Any man who could make a profit——" He broke off with a gesture of unbelief.

Clif put the last pair of shoes on the shelf and took up the handle of the truck which held the packing-box. "Come back to the office," he said, "and I'll show you what can be done in Hampton Valley."

They went back to the small fenced-off room which Clif called an office. It contained two chairs, a row of shelves, a cupboard, and a safe and roll-top desk of bygone workmanship. Clif got out his ledger cards, which showed scores of live accounts, and the working sheets that itemized his gains.

Mr. Nye glanced over them. He said little, but he looked at Clif with a new respect.

"What do you hear from your brother Ward?" he inquired abruptly.

"He's going through some darn' anxious days, as near as I can make out," Clif returned. "They put on one of his plays at Atlantic City early this month and as Ward said, it 'didn't fail.' He also said he'd found out he was no genius who would hit a star with the first arrow. Queer thing, isn't it, that no one knows what a play's going to do till it gets before the footlights?"

Mr. Nye nodded. "It's like taking the baby visiting. He may behave, and he may disgrace the whole family. I hope your brother will try another play."

"Not at present," declared Clif grimly. "He's still trying on this one. He said the first act limped across the stage, and the second one hadn't flesh enough on its

bones, but the third went over with a bang. It was the bang that saved his life. He's rewritten the rest of it and revamped it and upholstered it, and some play-doctor has taken a whack at it and stuck in a few gags and ripostes and snappy dialogues, and a few other French and American crutches, and now it's doing better."

"You mean it's still going?"

"Oh, yes. If a poor old play has any life in it anywhere, they give it oxygen and coax it along, you know. Sometimes they get a hardy veteran that way. Ward's play has been down to Baltimore and Washington, stopping occasionally on the way, and I judge it's getting braced up quite a bit. They're bringing it north again now, and it promises to circle around to New York in a few weeks."

"That's fine." Mr. Nye's tone was cordial, but his attention had wandered to a row of dishes on a shelf opposite him. They were broken and nicked dishes out of stock—bowls, a tureen, and some pitchers. Most evidently they had lost their value, and yet here they were, preserved with methodical care. They were so incomprehensible as to arouse his curiosity. Now he went over and stood on tiptoe to look into them.

"What under the canopy——" he muttered, because what he saw was no explanation at all. Each dish contained small pieces of wood, heterogeneous in kind and size, some of them carved or turned in strange shapes, some of them splashed with colors.

"What are these things?"

Clif, who had been called to the door by Tom Davis, wheeled to see what had been indicated.

"Oh, those!" He shrugged indifferently. "Those

are nothing. I used them to experiment on, but I might as well dump 'em out."

He crossed the office and opened the cupboard door. "This was a pink little pipe dream that I had once, and I mistook it for a big idea. I thought I was going to help amuse the youngsters of the country." He waved a negligent hand toward the shelves.

Henry Nye came over and stood looking. His first impression of variety presently resolved itself into items. There were games made chiefly of hardwood; figures modeled in clay; a house of wood and pasteboard, with curtained windows and a roof. Clif pointed this out with a momentary enthusiasm.

"This is the Hampton Portable. I used pasteboard because I didn't have the right materials, but the main part of it was to be of composition. It would be lighter than the wooden ones and smoother for small fingers. This comes entirely to pieces and packs flat in a box. It was to be made in different sizes—from a small room to a two-story house; and the roof could be lifted off, or a side of each room removed, to manipulate the household machinery.

"You see the way the supports are contrived? That makes it possible to put the larger ones together as one pleases—the rooms in different combinations, or grouped together to form a gymnasium, a hall, a barn, —almost any sort of building. The curtains and rugs were to be included—and of course the furniture, all knockdown and of composition."

"The Hampton Portable!" meditated Henry Nye. "That looks flexible enough to keep a youngster busy. I see how you did it. Any sort of building—and any sort of activity inside——"

"That was the idea in all of these," Clif broke in. "My theory is that children get tired of their playthings largely because each toy represents one action, and each game is one game. When the child gets tired of the one make-believe or the one game, the plaything is worn out. That isn't true of the best toys on the market, but it's true of far too many. My notion is that each article should be only the starting-point of endless make-believes and endless games which will be suggested by the original and which the child's imagination and ingenuity will develop. Each one of the games I worked out was to be at least five, with suggestions that would start the child in the right direction to devise countless others.

"Mother used to make up games for us, and I found they were different from those that the other boys had—totally different. That was what set me off. The best game isn't here. I've kept it in my room, because every little while I work out a fresh way of playing it. I believe it's brand-new, and it ought to interest the whole family—from the five-year-old to the grown-ups. It's played with marbles—on a board. I've worked out twenty games on it already."

While he had been talking, he had taken the Hampton Portable to pieces. It now lay flat on the shelf in amazing compactness. Clif pushed it aside and brought to the front some small figures modeled in clay.

Henry Nye's eyes fastened on one—a little girl with pigtails, holding a large open music-book drooping low from her relaxed fingers, and singing, singing! Her small mouth was eight quarters open in the interests of vocality. She was singing at the top of her voice with an earnestness and unself-consciousness that bent

her solemn effort back into the realm of merriment. As he studied her, Henry Nye smiled; then laughed; continued to laugh.

"By Jove!" he cried. "By Jove!"

"That's Lilting Liza," Clif explained.

"I should say it was. Where did you get her?"

"I made her up—and named her."

Henry Nye straightened his rimless glasses. "Well, Lilting Liza ought to make anybody forget his troubles."

Clif was gratified. "That's what I had hoped she might do," he admitted. "I had visions of her developed in composition with——"

Mr. Nye's attention was on another figure—a girl whose face and posture were full of mischief, of elusive withdrawal and provocativeness, bewitchingly mingled. She seemed to be alive; she was action and expressiveness. One forgot that she was made of material.

"Where did you get your training?"

"Training? Oh, in scraps. I had a year at Dartmouth, and during that time I managed to get in some drawing and wood-turning. I've read all the books I could get hold of. Mason sent me a foot-lathe and some materials. And the figures—my mother had modeled a good deal. She taught me how to use the clay."

His eyes grew absent, as they always did when he thought of his mother, whose life had been a silent, unconfessed tragedy and who had perpetuated that tragedy in the dreams of creativeness that had haunted her sons, without leading them very far on the road to success.

He was silent so long that the older man stole a glance at him. He caught on Clif's face that expression

that Heather had surprised there twice—an expression of utter discouragement, of frustrated ambition, of age called before its time. It was evident that Clif was no longer seeing these instruments of gaiety which his own hands had fashioned, that he was no longer conscious of his surroundings or his companion. In that moment of unintentional self-revelation, he made an ineffaceable appeal to Henry Nye. All the man's sorrowing paternity went out to this young fellow whose mentality functioned in the fragile tissues of imagination while his outer life was a succession of the most sordid details.

He covered his sympathy with a pretense of exasperation. "Don't you know you've got a gift, Clifton Stanleigh—the gift of imagination, of catching emotion and putting it through the double refraction that art requires—refracting it into a concrete medium, and then from that into a similar emotion in the observer? What the devil do you mean by selling overalls and tin spoons?"

Clif gave him a twisted smile. "I sell what I've got a market for."

"Well, good Lord, there's a market for imagination and ingenuity and fine workmanship—just the things that you show here. The stores are flooded with cheap toys—silly dolls and static miniatures of adult utensils and gaudy pieces of tin and wood that break by New Year's—but there's plenty of room for the high-grade articles that are clever and practically indestructible. And look what you've got in Hampton: plenty of wood, electricity, water power, railroad, reasonable accessibility to markets—— Why haven't you formed a company right here? You could begin in a small way,

with a few of the most promising articles. You've got more than a dozen here, and——"

Clif laughed. "I've got a notebook full of ideas that I've never had time to work up."

"Well, then, why didn't you get busy? Who's your leading financier?"

"Merton Hobart, but——"

"Why didn't you go to him, explain the whole proposition, and see if he wouldn't——"

Clif waved a helpless hand. "Just a minute," he begged, "and I'll tell you."

Henry Nye smiled and suspended his vehemence.

Clif continued. "I was darn' fool enough to get these things patented last year. And I did go to Merton Hobart, because I knew if he sanctioned the idea, we might form a company and go ahead; and I knew, too, that we couldn't form a company unless he did sanction it, since financial Hampton eats out of his hand. He has an interest in the sawmill, and we should have needed considerable wood, and also sawdust in the composition for the figures. Besides, Hobart is in touch with outside capital. But he turned the project down flat. That's why I put it aside. If I had been free, I might have tried somewhere else, but——"

"What was Hobart's objection?"

"He was vague, but decided. Said it hadn't been tried out and it would probably fail. He thought it might take a hundred thousand to start it safely, and more to back it."

"Well, what of it?"

Clif stared at him. "It's a good deal of money to put into a new enterprise. When I thought it over, I could see myself that Hampton wouldn't venture it."

"Wouldn't, eh? Maybe not. By the way, I'd like to see your marble game. Will you bring it down sometime?"

"Certainly, but——"

"Clif Stanleigh, there's one word you may as well know that I don't like. It's *but*. I don't allow it around me. Now I suppose you haven't any objection to my talking this over with Hobart, have you?"

"Well, hardly," Clif replied with a smile, "although——" He did not finish the sentence. Ultimately Henry Nye finished it for himself.

CHAPTER XXX

AS summer shaded into fall, Mrs. Romilda Giddings felt that existence became steadily more complex. Mrs. Davenway had taken over the duties of the nurse, who had left at the end of the week; and under stress of crowded days and still with the plan of selling the house as soon as possible, she had dismissed the boarders. Mrs. Giddings, however, was allowed to retain her rooms, and was secretly pleased to go to the Hotel Hampton for meals.

Several times a week, Mr. Brisbee, the lawyer from Loopville, drove through Hampton Valley and stopped for a chat—a circumstance which was deliciously agitating. It is all very well to deplore the susceptibility of the young girl, but for real palpitation the widow's heart is the organ best adapted. It palpitates somewhat knowingly, with experienced cleverness.

And Mrs. Giddings felt that hers had a perfect right to palpitate if it chose. A decorous interval had elapsed since the passing of her "first husband," as she now referred to the late Randy, so that she was wearing black-and-white only because she found it extremely becoming to her hair. She observed to fellow-citizens: "I've been only in quarter mourning for some months now, and my time was up in August."

Really she had done her full duty by Randy and was entitled to give her attention to other matters.

Daphne, coming into her mother's room one morning, found Mrs. Giddings studying samples of colored silks which she had received from a Boston firm that had just as soon erase Styggles & Company from the mercantile map as not.

"My gracious, ma," cried Daphy, aghast, "are you planning to tog up as gay as this looks?"

"I don't know any reason why I shouldn't if I find the inclination in my breast," retorted Mrs. Giddings with spirit. "With a large circle of friends such as I've got, it's my duty not to look monotonous."

"Well, you needn't worry. Ain't anything 'specially monotonous about the rig you got on right now, let alone the samples."

Her disdainful eyes swept over her mother's gown—a white wool with black stripes of different widths slanting into one another at strange angles, due to the daring way in which the various sections had been joined. It emphasized the startling streaks of white in her dark hair. When Mrs. Giddings moved across the room in this gown, she gave the impression of a zebra turning a somersault, but she was far from suspecting any such effect.

"My goodness," proclaimed Daphy further, "what are you so decked out with jewelry for? You look as if you expected to lead a circus parade."

At times a remark of this nature would have found Mrs. Giddings instantly inflammable, but this morning she was poised in some unusual serenity. She did not immediately emerge from her thoughtful consideration of terra cotta and king's blue. "I am prepared for guests," she explained at length.

"Guests! Who's coming?"

"My attorney-at-law," elucidated Mrs. Giddings grandly. "Sometime today, but I know not the hour."

"Good grief, ma, why the fireworks? If Mr. Brisbee wants to see a jewelry display, send him down to look into Elias Grobar's window, and be done with it. He'll think you're a fool."

"A fool? I, a fool?" Mrs. Giddings suspended her thought-work on the samples and looked up in offended majesty.

"Uh-huh." Daphy was gazing anxiously into her mother's mirror. She was afraid her eyebrows were a trifle too dark to day. "What do you s'pose he'll think of you—all dolled up?"

Mrs. Giddings became a prey to ponderous coquetry. "Daphy," she intoned impressively, "that is not a dullicate question. If you fancy for a minute that I'd tell you what I think he thinks—well, hardly."

"Good Lord!" Daphy forgot her eyebrows and wheeled toward her mother in sharp astonishment.

"My deluded child, have you once recapitulated how often he comes? And why? He is a childless widower with one of the very finest houses in Loopville. I was there once before his wife died; and let me tell you, it's swell. Modern! Vastly convenient! The furnishings are grand. Well, when a man, a widower, fitted up with a home like that and no lady's hand to run it—when he, I say, drives seventeen miles many times every moon to call on a lady who is temporarily without a husband, there are conclusions—that may—be drawn."

Daphy continued to gaze at her mother in bewilderment.

"Do not fear, my child. One reason I'm dragging

forth thoughts that have been in their recesses is so't you'll know you have nothing to lose, and a father to gain. I have talked with Mr. Brisbee about your rights, and he takes an overwhelming interest in everything that concerns us both."

Daphy had had time to recover her speech. As she listened, the color had deepened in her clear cheeks; surprise had given way to indignation and shame.

"You've got the wrong tip on it somehow, ma," she declared crisply. "As for his coming so often, I s'pose your investments take a lot of talking over, don't they? And of course he makes money out of——"

"Don't you utter a slur on his fair name," warned her mother. "He's a choice man. He's one of the finest——"

"I know he is," snapped Daphy. "I hand it to him, all right. Ain't a man in Hampton that can hold a candle to him."

Mrs. Giddings gave her a shrewd glance. "If you admire him so much, how does it happen that you don't ever compare Sid Morrow with him? You could see then——"

"Aw, stick to common sense, ma," Daphy cut in sharply. "Sid's in my own class, and that makes a difference. What show would I have with a man on Mr. Brisbee's level?"

Mrs. Giddings bridled. "I'm sure I don't understand, Daphy, how you got such low-browed feelings. But of course I am gratified that you rank him so high, as long as I'm considering——"

Daphy's impatience burst in on her mother's soaring satisfaction. "You ain't thinking straight, ma. Mr. Brisbee is the finest man I ever saw; I agree with

you on that, anyhow. But that's what ought to smash your hopes. His being so grand a man is just the reason he never'd have anything to do with a Giddings."

"Daphne Isabel! How can you speak so of your family? Your family!"

"'Cause I know darn' well what's in it," flared Daphy. "A little money, and not much else."

She flung away from the mirror and dashed into her own room. She was more stirred by these revelations than anyone would have believed possible. Daphy had a streak of rigid pride which repudiated her mother's dreamings as outrageous and humiliating. Before she had emerged from the first turbulence of her resentment, Mrs. Giddings made the huge mistake of trailing in after her with further interesting items.

"You have wounded me cruelly, Daphne, but I am going to overlook it if you'll concede to my wishes in one only and solitary particular. I want you to promise not to have anything to do with Sid Morrow for—for a month."

"What?" Daphy faced her with lowering brows.

"For a month—and then see."

"What are you springing? What's going to happen in a month?"

"I do not know. All I know is that it will happen soon."

"Ma, talk English," advised Daphy impatiently.

"If you force me to be implicit, then, I have broached Sid to Mr. Brisbee, and I was pleased to find that he agreed with me absolutely. He said something must be done."

Daphy's chest lifted. The scarlet raced into her

cheeks. "He did!" she stormed. "What's he going to do about it?"

"He is a wise and just gentleman," preambled Mrs. Giddings, with splendid reticence, "but I do not know the branches of his thought. Last time he was here, he said he had a plan, but he wasn't ready to tell me about it. Nevertheless, I've taken steps. I wait. And I want you to wait."

"Oh, you—you want!" panted Daphy, half stifled by rage. "How could you talk me over with him? I'll die of shame. Ain't it bad enough to come outa a family like mine and never get any training or any sympathy or anything the other girls get—but you must go 'round criticizing me to outsiders?"

"Daphne Isabel! Do you know you're insulting me? Oh, oh, to think that we should be torn by distension like this! Haven't I done everything for you and——"

"No, you haven't," exploded Daphy. "You never give me anything but money and nagging. I've been nagged till—till I'm worn to a frazzle. It's bad enough to have you criticizing me to Minty Pickering and your other cronies all over Hampton; but when you carry my affairs into Loopville and Moon Hollow and all over Spinooski County—why, then you're going too far, Mrs. Romilda Tuft Giddings. I'll make you sorry for that—see if I don't."

"Oh! Oh high heaven!" groaned Mrs. Giddings. "Have mercy on a persecuted mother!" With a dramatic lifting of her shoulders, Mrs. Giddings rolled her eyes over the papered ceiling, burst into tears, and staggered into her own room with an effect of purple tragedy which was intended to wrench sympathy from any onlooker.

But it failed with Daphne. The moment the door was closed, she faced about and stared silently at her reflection in the mirror. She was blazing with wrath.

"So she's taken steps, has she?" she muttered. "Well, I'll show both of 'em I can take a step of my own."

She dashed out of the room and downstairs to the telephone. First she called up Sid Morrow.

"Listen, Sid!" she began, in a tone guarded from possible overhearing. "Say, honey, do you still feel same way—'bout taking me outa this hole? . . . That settles it, then, 'cause I got the money. . . . Yes, I tell you I'll furnish the money. . . . Why, what's the matter? Didn't you say you wanted to? . . . Well, then, it's all right, I tell you. I'll furnish the money. . . . Yes, I can. I gotta scheme. Now listen! Pack your suit case and meet me in half an hour at the end of Hill Street. . . . Yeh, half an hour. G'bye."

When she re-entered her room, she was creeping softly. But her mother's door was closed. It was evident that Mrs. Giddings was still nursing her injured feelings and waiting for overtures from a repentant daughter. But Daphne had embarked upon a plan which in the nature of things was opposed to repentance.

She slipped into her new brown suit. From her clothes-press she brought out a small fitted bag, which she packed by the simple method of diving into dresser drawers, grabbing silken garments, and transferring them with careless flings. Then she pulled a small hat of brown velvet down over her puffed blond hair, fastened her new silver fox around her neck—it wasn't cold enough so that she needed it, but it was a good thing to have along—appended her muff and purse,

took up the leather bag, and started forth on her quest for liberty. Daphy was at all times a pretty girl, but to-day, fired by indignation and longing for independence, she had thrown off the apathy that sometimes obscured her radiance and had become a vision of glowing animation.

It was an hour and a half later that Minty Pickering galloped into Mrs. Davenway's yard and trailed her friend Romie to her den of injured seclusion. She brought news delightfully deplorable: Daphy and Sid Morrow had been seen to board the down train, going in the general direction of Broomfield. They had bought no tickets, but——

"But there ain't a doubt," concluded Mrs. Pickering, "that Daphy's 'loped—and with a feller that you know. If 'twas a stranger, there'd be a chance of his bein' worth while—but Sid!"

Both ladies disposed of Sid Morrow with little puffs of breath that needed no translating.

"Oh heaven!" groaned Mrs. Giddings, rolling her eyes in agonized despair. She was pacing up and down her room, looking more than ever like a nervous zebra. "What shall I do to convert this disgrace? What shall I—oh, I see; I see."

She tore out of the room and downstairs to the telephone. She called up the Hotel Hampton and the three garages, thereby locating two automobiles which were available for pursuit. In a few minutes the two drew up in front of Mrs. Davenway's. Mrs. Giddings bounced down the path, waving her arms in extravagant gesturing.

"Why are you here?" she demanded. "Why aren't you following my daughter?"

"You didn't tell us where to go," returned Eli Hamel, one of the drivers—a willing man, but practical.

"Well, how do I know where?" retorted Mrs. Giddings with heat. "Take the roads to Broomfield. If one of you breaks down, the other's to keep on going. Stop at the stations. Inquire! Follow clues! Search the four corners of the compass. Bring me back the child of my youth. Go!"

On a gesture that the Statue of Liberty got away with, Mrs. Giddings rose to a fine frenzy of exhortation; but the full effect was weakened by the unresponsiveness of Eli Hamel, who stroked his chin unmoved and cast a bright sidelong glance at the agitated lady.

"How long you willin' to pay us for, Mis' Giddin's —for searchin' them there corners?"

"Oh!" puffed Mrs. Giddings in disgust over this mercenary plain-speaking. "All day! All night! Till you sink with exhaustion! But go!"

They went. Mrs. Giddings, turning toward the house, caught a glimpse of two Hamptonites approaching and was mindful that the time for an actress to act is when the stage is set and the audience present. Throwing her striped arms above her striped head, she waved them in dramatic despair and staggered up the path.

Daphy had nearly an hour's start of her pursuers, but she had taken a slower means of transportation, the train for Broomfield being capable of stopping now and then in a meadow for reasons never clear to the passengers; and even when it was moving, there was no hurry about it.

Nor was Daphy worrying about being followed. Her

mind was occupied with Sid, who had not proved wholly satisfactory. The minute she had seen him, waiting at the end of Hill Street, she had noticed that he was not so sleekly jaunty as usual.

"What's the matter, Sid?" she had inquired sharply. "You don't look tickled. Did you have trouble getting away?"

"No," he admitted heavily. "I said I was sick and couldn't hang around. But say, Daphy, your mother won't like this."

An ugly thought flashed through Daphy's brain, and she gave her lover a shrewd glance that had more suspicion in it than affection. "Wha's matter, Sid? You 'fraid she'll cut me off?"

He shifted uneasily. "Now see here, Daphy, I'm just thinking 'bout you. I don't want to get you in bad."

She smiled at him then. "Don't worry. Ma'll get over it; I know her. Besides, didn't I tell you I'd got money?"

He grunted. "What's a few dollars to——"

" 'Tain't a few dollars," she snapped. "I got a coupla thousand."

"Gee!" He stared in astonishment; then his face brightened. "Why, you never told me——"

"Telling you now. That's enough to do quite a lot of eloping on, ain't it?"

"You betcha. It is so, honey. Wasn't she a sly little kitten not to tell her Siddie before? Mebbe we could invest some of it in a few safe-and-sure's and roll it into a wad? Huh?"

Daphy's complacency was restored now. "We're in time to take the Broomfield train, Sid. I 'phoned Mr.

Brisbee, 'cause he's got my money. We'll get it and then we'll hike on to Boston or somewhere."

She did not dim this high moment by mentioning the sordid detail that her two thousand dollars was being held in trust till she should be twenty-one, and she had still a year to travel before she would reach that point. Knowing nothing of business, she felt sure that Mr. Brisbee would knock over this bothersome legal barrier and give her the advance that this crisis in her life demanded. The money was hers, wasn't it? It would not be asking much; and if he was so deeply interested in her mother, he'd probably be glad to accommodate the daughter.

Loopville was much larger than Hampton. It had real office buildings, with real lobbies. In one of the latter, Daphy left Sid, for reasons of diplomacy, while she went up to Mr. Brisbee's offices. She was expected; she was ushered at once into a private sanctum.

Mr. Brisbee rose with evident pleasure to greet her. He was a man of forty-five, with a kindly face. He was a successful lawyer, with a reputation for fairness and integrity, so it was no wonder that Mrs. Giddings had been overcome by the astonishing amount of time which he had devoted to his client in Hampton Valley.

Daphy darted straight to the point. "Oh, Mr. Brisbee, I—I want to get married."

"Daphy, you sweet child! And you came——"

"Yes, I had to," interrupted Daphy, somewhat surprised but taking this as a good omen for the granting of her request. "I had to have some money first."

There was a soft light in his eyes as he smiled in-

dulgently at her. "You don't need any money to get married with."

"Oh, but I do. I——"

He didn't wait for her to finish. "I suppose your mother has told you things from which you understood that I——"

"She told me you didn't approve of my taste," broke in Daphy, with a trace of bitterness, "but——"

"Didn't approve!" he repeated, puzzled. "Why, darling child, I approve of you from the bottom of my heart. If you hadn't come here, I should have gone to Hampton today to ask you to marry me."

"What!" gasped Daphy. "Me! Do you mean me?"

"I mean you."

Daphy sank into a chair; the color flickered in and out of her pretty face. "Good Lord! Say it again."

He said it again, with more elaboration but with none of the polish that distinguished him in professional moments. Daphy was stunned by the unexpectedness of the avowal.

"But why—why——" Her bewilderment was pathetically genuine. Daphy had never allowed her expectations to mount high.

"For an old-fashioned reason, Daphy. I love you. I can give you a good home; I believe I can make you happy. You haven't had——" He checked himself; then rephrased his thought. "I admire your spirit and your liveliness and the way you forge ahead toward the best that's in sight. I've done nothing but work hard all my life. I've had a struggle for whatever success I've attained, and I've never had the joyousness and the spontaneous good time that you can show me how to have. In return I'm sure I can put

some happy things into your life that you haven't—that you deserve. Will you let me do it, Daphy?"

"Will I? Jiminy come Christmas! How'd this ever happen?" She sprang out of her chair, fighting an emotion that Mr. Brisbee only partially understood. He watched her in anxious perturbation.

Daphy gulped. "Why, I—I think you're the most wonderful man I ever knew, but—but I didn't s'pose you'd reach down for a little worm li-i-ike me." The tears flew into her eyes and brimmed over her flushed cheeks. "I guess it ain't real."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. Her sobs quieted; she looked up into his face with a dazzling smile of joy. "It—I guess it is real," she breathed ecstatically.

Abruptly her expression changed. She stepped back in consternation. "What am I thinking of? Why, I can't marry you. I've got a man outside waiting."

"Man—waiting? For what?"

"For me to marry him. I'd forgotten all about it."

He laughed happily. "Well, if you'd forgotten him——"

"But he hasn't forgotten," Daphy pointed out excitedly. "It's Sid Morrow, and he's waiting for me to get some——"

"I'll dispose of him, darling." He kissed her again.

"Say, go to it," urged Daphy gleefully. "And here, take him this." She emptied on the desk a jumble of silver and bills from her purse. "I'll bet he hasn't got a red cent. Just say to him that I'll tell Hampton I asked him to escort me down here."

Mr. Brisbee, at the door, threw her a glance of admiration for this shrewd interpretation which might

forestall gossip and protect everybody's pride. "Not bad, little Daphy. I believe you're going to make a good partner. Pick up your change. When I get back, we'll plan."

Daphy gathered up her money and wandered nervously around the room. She pinched her arm in twenty places, and it hurt every time. Having faith in this test, she was constrained to admit that this marvelous, unbelievable good fortune had really come to her.

She never knew quite how Sid was eliminated. But Grant Brisbee had had too much experience with refractory humanity to be baffled by this errand—or even to be greatly delayed by it. In an incredibly short time he came back upstairs.

Before twelve o'clock Daphy had become Mrs. Grant Brisbee. At twelve fifteen she entered the Loopville Inn with her husband and spent a leisurely hour eating an expensive dinner. Then the Grant Brisbees suspended their whirlwind ecstasy and came down to duty. They drove reluctantly toward Hampton Valley to give explanations and to receive—they knew not what.

Mrs. Davenway met them. Gallantly she concealed her inner stupefaction and bore down heavily on expediency.

"If I were in your places," she suggested kindly, "I'd go into the parlor and take some comfortable chairs, while I break the news to Mrs. Giddings. She'll be pleased, of course—but surprised."

She found Mrs. Giddings in her own room, waiting anxiously for some message. In spite of the bombastic self-consciousness which she had allowed to grow steadily in the last few months of affluence, she was genuinely

distressed about her daughter. Her face showed worriment and the fever of suspense. Nevertheless, she was in no way prepared for the amazing developments which Mrs. Davenway related as gently as possible.

Mrs. Davenway thought the astounded lady was going to swoon. She dashed for the filigree bottle of smelling salts on the dresser and flew back, flinging up a window on her way.

" 'Course you're a bit overcome," she soothed, "but you're glad that Daphy's done so well. You admire Mr. Brisbee, you know."

Mrs. Giddings, whose eyes had been roving dazedly, roused at this, and her hands ceased fluttering. There were a good many past episodes which made it impossible for her to deny this particular admiration.

"I had reason," she gasped, "not to expect—this."

She recovered herself slowly; but at last, after fifteen minutes of the heaviest suasion that Mrs. Davenway had ever perpetrated, Mrs. Giddings had subdued a number of emotions that would not do for public exhibition and felt she could express others that would be irreproachable. She rose and readjusted several pieces of jewelry which had suffered from her agitation.

"Thank you, Mrs. Davenway, for your sympathy in this trying hour," she said with martyred dignity. "I will go down now and welcome the young matron."

CHAPTER XXXI

A LITTLE later that same afternoon Sid Morrow returned to Hampton Valley, driven by Eli Hamel. Accepting Daphy's ingenious explanation of their trip to Loopville, he informed Mr. Cooper that Daphne Giddings had requested his escort on an errand, and this tale was faithfully spread through the Valley. It was true, and Hampton never learned that it was not the entire truth.

The two automobiles having traced the pair to Loopville, the young Mr. Morrow was able to choose between them for a conveyance that would take him back to Hampton and to the job which he could not afford to lose. On the whole he was relieved not to have on his hands a bride who might be cut off from a financial future, and it gave him a reminiscent amusement to reflect that his fare to Loopville had been paid by Daphy, and his return transportation by her mother, to say nothing of his having received valuable words of legal advice without charge. He was in many ways the richer for his outing.

When the Grant Brisbees returned to their home in Loopville to make plans for an extended honeymoon, Mrs. Giddings found herself unexpectedly desolate. She at once gave up her rooms at Mrs. Davenway's and declared that for the present she would "formulate headquarters at the Hotel Hampton."

The Davenway house had become a strangely different place. There were no boarders banging doors and running up and down stairs; there were no "mealers" filing in at night. Heather and her mother were now alone except for the helpless invalid upstairs. The nurse had been gone several days.

With Heather's engagement Mrs. Davenway's plans had been interrupted. There was no longer any reason why she should sell—nor had a customer so far appeared. Sometimes she thought she would dispose of the house if she had the opportunity, and sometimes she considered making it into two apartments. She was undecided. Her great relief was that she would not have to leave Hampton Valley and all her many friends. So long as she could stay in town, she cared less about the house in which she lived than does the typical New England woman. She had been born in New York State; she had come to the Valley as a young woman; and she had lived in this particular house only fifteen years. These transplantations had given her a flexible attitude which seemed heretical to many of her friends, and she had none of the house-worship which is characteristic of Vermont.

Mrs. Davenway's immediate feeling was one of thankfulness that she still had her house during these weeks of Booth Ransome's illness. What would the poor man have done, she often thought, if he had been at the hotel? Even with her unremitting efforts, she could not make him comfortable, but at least he was making a slow recovery.

His arms were in plaster casts, with "windows" through which the wounds might be dressed; and he could not move them or change position without as-

sistance. The big man who had been bustling and full of life was struck down into a pathetic dependence. One of the village men came in for a few hours each day to move him and to entertain him with the latest gossip; but aside from that, Mrs. Davenway took care of him herself. Sometimes she dressed the wounds; she brought trays of light food, as dainty and varied as her skill could command; she fed him; she recounted whatever news came her way, and read from newspapers and books.

Booth Ransome accepted these ministrations with an odd resentment, smouldering and sullen. He spoke sharply; he swore; he was impatient and cross; but Mrs. Davenway's manner never changed. She was calm and quiet, manifestly full of sympathy but never expressing it. The days were long and harrowing to both of them.

In the meantime the business section of Hampton Valley had developed a few ripples of heated discussion. Henry Nye was still at the Hotel Hampton, and from time to time he sought out leading citizens and sounded them about a possible new industry in the Valley.

Three points stood out clearly as a result of various interviews: Hampton had no faith that any idea having marketable value would arise in its own midst. If any citizen felt that he had originated such an idea, he was at liberty to take it to some city and fight it out with reckless individuals who liked perilous games of chance. The second point was that if Henry Nye wanted to put, for instance, fifty or a hundred thousand dollars into a factory at Hampton Valley, a number of the less affluent citizens might encourage him by buying a few shares of stock at an investment per

capita of from five to one hundred dollars. They would by no means endorse the project; but if he put part of his fortune behind that project, they might take the wild chance of making a few dividends along with him. A further and more personal point was that Hampton Valley had no faith in Clifton Stanleigh as an individual. He was poor and he looked poor. He came of a visionary family that had never succeeded, and a town that is rich in proverbs knows that history repeats itself; that you can judge the future by the past; that the son is like the father; and that as the twig is bent, so the tree is inclined. It was also primed with a number of other truisms, any one of which would have blotted out Clifton's future before he got to it.

At the end of a week Henry Nye had discovered for himself that Hampton was solidly conservative. It deplored flightiness and visions and change as cankers that eat into an established order, which should be maintained. When Selah Flinker had sold his farm and after living three years in Mrs. Buttles's upstairs tenement, built a house on Hill Street, only to sell it two years later and build again—then Hampton shook its head and murmured sad things about rolling stones. Hampton took it for granted that the gathering of moss should be the prime object in Mr. Flinker's life and did not believe at all that any exhilaration may be gained from mere rolling.

If the building of railroads had been left to the village fathers, there would have been less done in the way of transportation, which obviously encourages change and is therefore pernicious. Of course, so long as impulsive visionaries had provided railroads, Hamp-

ton used them—but always within bounds. It even approved them heartily as a convenient means of juggling milk cans from one geographical point to another, and also as facilitating brief visits to relatives in Loopville and Kenner Falls and Moon Hollow. Leading citizens, like Judge Truman Weatherwax and the Oscar Judevines and the Merton Hobarts, might be trusted to go as far as Boston or New York and come back untouched by disloyalty; but it was understood that longer trips should be undertaken only for the purpose of collecting evidence to prove that "little old Hampton beats the world and is plenty good enough for us."

There had been a time, however, when Hampton Valley was vigorously aggressive, fighting for its life, meeting tomahawk with gun, wild teeth with trap and shot. It had wrung crops from the thin, rocky soil; it had endured cold and isolation, drought that had choked off the growing grain, frost that had cut down the crop before its maturity. It had struggled with hardships until gradually the savagery of Indians and animals had been conquered, and the natural rigors of the section had been subdued by modern agencies and better transportation between farms and between towns.

But for generations now, Hampton has been freed from the fight for existence, and therefore it is resting —peacefully resting. It naps; it moves only in the pleasant languor that is the aftermath of exertion. It builds excellent roads because the luxury of the automobile demands them. But beyond that, it scarcely bothers with new problems; it blazes no industrial trails; it devises no new solutions. Rather, it reaches out and draws back to itself those inventions and con-

trivances which are the product of other and more stirring localities. It copies; it adopts; but it no longer creates. It strings the streets and houses with electric lights; it runs its machinery by electric current; it harvests its crops with the newest kind of harvester; it milks with patent milkers; it beats up the thin sand of its charming roads with high-powered cars; it wears clothes from Boston and New York; it spends winters in Florida and the West. It does whatever other sections do; but what the other sections do not do, it never does.

Herein is no particular criticism of Hampton Valley. It is like a thousand other Hampton Valleys in this and other states, following out the cycle of evolution upon which they started. They were the product of pioneer necessity. They served their purpose; but the purpose no longer exists. And still the Hampton Valleys dot the Green Mountain slopes as thickly as ever, like shells on the beach from which the life has fled.

It is purpose alone that vitalizes a community, that justifies its existence. To aim toward the accomplishment of something worth accomplishing—that is purpose, which makes for progress. To work for benefits and training and opportunities for its citizens—that is purpose. To settle back and slumber in the armchair of past accomplishment—that is decay and degeneration.

And how is it with Hampton Valley, and with hundreds of other Hampton Valleys? Why do they give the outsider this impression of lethargy? Hampton may think it is the same village that existed in that

spot generations ago, but intrinsically it is totally different, because its aim has changed.

When the horse and the ox were the only agents of transportation the villages had to be close together, and each village had to be diversified to meet the needs of its own outlying districts. But the railroad modified these necessities, and the automobile has well-nigh obliterated them. The farmer now can reach the next county as easily as formerly he could reach the nearest village. Multifarious crop-raising has given way to dairying. Farms have been combined into larger and larger units. The exigencies of defense have disappeared altogether. Not one village in five is any longer needed for the same sort of intensive centralization that was a necessity a century ago.

And what does this mean? Not that villages should be wiped out by economic combinations, but that new purposes should be substituted for those that are past. Otherwise the village, favored in picturesqueness and beauty, is, with respect to civilization, as much a morbid growth as the fungus, also charming to the eye, which has nothing to do with the normal functioning of the tree and even saps vitality from it.

CHAPTER XXXII

CULA CLARE LEATHERS had entered on a new era. Her old dreary placidity was gone. Strange new thoughts filled her mind and hurried her breath—wicked thoughts, probably, but fascinating. The ringleader had become fairly a slogan, racing over its cell-track a dozen times an hour. It was:

"Remember Aunt Debbie!"

Heather Davenway was responsible. Comprehending that Cula was ruled by her ancestors as a brow-beaten child is ruled by its parents, Heather had deliberately probed the Leathers ancestry for the element that would further the present purpose. And had found it in the vivacious and popular Deborah Leathers! Brushing aside everybody else whose memory might clutter up the ancestral pathway, she had conjured the distant belle nearer and clearer, until Cula could almost see Aunt Debbie before her, holding out a kindly hand to guide her grand-niece into the social current. Through daily adjurations she had come to believe that if she could snap some chain of restraint that bound her, she would develop the potentialities of her bewitching fore-aunt.

Also, following definite advice, she had rummaged in a small japanned box of treasures and had brought forth an amethyst ring in a high, quaint setting. It

had belonged to Aunt Debbie. Cula slipped it on her own finger; and whenever she glanced down at it, it was reverently, as at a sacred talisman.

Then, too, she had brought out a picture of Aunt Debbie and now kept it on the table with her sewing. It was a daguerreotype with embossed black covers, one of them lined with embossed red velvet, padded and finished with gilt; the other containing the picture of a handsome young woman in an old-fashioned gown that had low shoulder lines and a wide skirt. Her hair was abundant and elaborately dressed. The flush in her cheeks had been grossly maligned by daguerreotype art, but the look of mischief in the dark eyes undoubtedly did full justice to Aunt Debbie herself. And it was rapidly becoming a lure for her niece Cula Clare, as it had once been for her many swains.

Poor lonely Cula spent hours studying this picture—and wondering. Day and night through her bewildered, awakened brain raced that magic exhortation: "Remember Aunt Debbie."

She had had one opportunity of trying out the new precepts at Mrs. Davenway's. It was at the final supper which the "mealers" were to have, their dismissal having been hastened by Ransome's accident and the increased demands upon Mrs. Davenway's time. Beyond a brief nod of greeting, Cula never once looked at Zelotes Joselyn, never once addressed a word to him, but was assiduously absorbed in the chatter of all other mealers. She was inwardly quaking at her own rudeness, but outwardly she was sustained by Heather's mute messages of approval and encouragement.

Lote was amazed. His small bright eyes darted here and there for explanation. To be ignored by any old

maid whatsoever, was a new experience to Lote. And by no means agreeable! It gave point to Heather's arraignment. He had been miserably unhappy since he had called down upon himself that unflattering analysis; being consequently more sensitive than he had ever been before, he felt stricken by Cula's studied indifference.

"By golly," he said to himself, "Heather's told her that I said she was desp'rate, and she's payin' me back. I'll be dadblamed if she ain't."

But he could not let it rest there. He had to prove it, as one has to prove that a bruise still hurts by pressing it with an inquisitive finger. As they rose from the table, he spoke.

"Been a nice day, Cula, hain't it?" he said.

She gave him a cool glance. "Do you think so?" she returned, and went swiftly past him.

Zelotes blinked. He lurched into the jamb as he went through the door to the porch. His bright, staring eyes followed Cula's flying figure as if she had been a new kind of ghost.

Cula hurried madly down the street and plunged into her shabby old box of a house. Her hand trembled so that she could scarcely open the door. She threw herself into the chair by her sewing table and burst into tears. She cried up two handkerchiefs before her emotions were under control.

Through the evening she sat there, sobbing intermittently, sighing, looking out into the street, where dim shapes passed occasionally and the bright lights of an automobile now and then scattered the darkness. She was too dispirited to light her lamp. She crept off early to bed, but it was hours before she went to

sleep. Scarcely had she dropped off when a voice seemed to shout in her ear: "Remember Aunt Debbie." She sprang up, and her startled eyes seemed to read letters of fire on the wall: "Remember Aunt Debbie." After a time she sank back with a groan. What should have been a night's rest became instead a chain of infrequent cat-naps, interspersed with horrible misgivings.

It is difficult—this business of being a flirt—unless one is really fitted for it.

But the next day Cula, from a decorous station behind the mended lace curtains in her sitting-room-kitchen, saw Mr. Zelotes Joselyn go past three times, at two-hour intervals; and each time he strolled with extreme moderation, glancing toward the house in the manner of one who thinks it probable that somebody whom he knows may be looking out of the window or emerging from the door.

"I guess he ain't so awful mad," thought Cula. "Not so awful mad, I wouldn't think!" And felt considerably easier in her mind.

And then came the real test, the supreme ordeal. It was announced that an entertainment and social would be held at the town hall to buy uniforms for the Hampton Valley Band, a gallant group of men who had practiced orchestration down on the banks of the Spinooski—which, by its superior sound volume, performed the function of blotting discords for possible listeners—until the village felt that the time had come for assistance and recognition.

Heather redoubled her tutelage. The shades of Aunt Debbie were given no peace. When the evening arrived, Heather went down to make sure that her

pupil was properly arrayed for conquest. She took charge of Cula's hair and listened to no protest, greatly to the scandalized amazement of the transfixed Miss Leathers, who watched the process in the mahogany-framed mirror.

"Don't say a word," warned Heather, amused. "It'll be becoming, and that's all you ought to care. Hair's a very flexible possession, and you can do lots with it."

"Looks like—you're doing a lot," admitted Cula faintly.

"Of course I am. And you please get awfully excited, so that your cheeks will grow pinker. If you don't, I shall paint them with raspberry juice. Take your choice."

Cula took it—wholly on the side of nature. Between self-distrust and her exaltation over the marvelous wistaria gown, she was in a state of emotional turbulence that deepened her eyes and flooded her face with delightful pink.

The amethyst ring was on her finger, and Heather's words were constantly in her ears: "Remember Aunt Debbie."

As if she would ever forget!

Wylie Chamberlain called at the boxy old Leathers house and escorted them to the hall.

First there was a program of native items. Talented Hamptonites sang and gave readings and took liberties with the pianoforte, and sang some more. The benches were then moved back around the walls to make way for old-fashioned games: part of them intended to be pure fun, and part intended to swell the proceeds for the uniforms through the crafty expedient of making forfeits redeemable at a nickel per. The

audience oozed out to the cloakroom to make ready for the sport.

Cula was one of the last to shed her coat. Consequently when she re-entered, the hall was fairly well filled by the more expeditious. Timidity had held her back, but her delay had all the effect of a clever ruse. Her appearance precipitated a dramatic hush; then an elbowing ran around the hall, like hitting a row of balls.

If Cula had burst upon them in cap and bells or in a Madame Sheba costume of beads, they would not have been more astonished. The village had not heard about the wistaria gown; no one had thought that decent clothes might put Cula in the front row with the best of them. Not only was the gown tremendously becoming, but so was the excitement that sparkled in her expression. Her hair no longer had the pathetic look that gray hair stands ready to assume; it was arranged more loosely, with careless care, which obliterated the strained pull at her features.

Ratty Dingwall leaned forward, his light blue eyes staring. "By durn!" he said, inadvisably. "Well, by durn!"

Instantly Ophelia Dingwall was on the job. "Don't wiggle the bench so, Ratty—though I don't wonder you're shocked. I'd think Cula'd be ashamed. I truly would."

But Ratty continued to stare and to repeat softly: "By durn! Well, say!"

Cula had dreaded this moment; but when it came, a strange thing happened to her—the culmination of forces that had been circling her system for many days. She sensed the amazement; she felt the admixture of

criticism; but she was feminine enough to know that Hampton found her worth looking at and watching. Heather had said she must look different. Well, evidently that step had been accomplished. Her thumb curled till it found the slender band of the amethyst ring; and at the magic touch Cula realized that this was to be team work: she and Aunt Debbie would storm the town together. Fairly intoxicated by her high and desperate resolve, she threw herself into the games with a vivacity that Hampton had not seen in her since her school days.

She became a social center through two perfectly human agencies—admiration and curiosity. Her liveliness was a revelation, and everybody wondered how far she would go and what she would do next. Ratty Dingwall escaped from the wrathful Ophelia and made it a point to keep as near Cula as possible. It was like their school days again. It helped to pin her back to her girlhood.

Lote Joselyn sat on a bench and stared. His small bright eyes, in their folds of loose skin, shone with the wary watchfulness of an elephant. He looked as if Cula had played a trick on him—somehow. As she passed him in a game which involved pursuit of a sailing feather, she paused to observe:

"Too bad you don't feel able to play. Don't you think it might limber you up a mite?"

The already stricken Lote slumped perceptibly. He blinked before this radiant sauciness in wistaria silk.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he groaned inwardly. "She thinks I'm old, does she? On the shelf, huh? An old man, huh? Well—gosh!"

Zelotes scrambled to his feet and plunged into the

gaiety too, by way of proving that he wasn't on the shelf at all.

Game followed game, till finally Chase the Squirrel was begun. Cula, touring around the circle of players, who were hand-in-hand, tagged Erastus Dingwall. He wrenched himself free and started after her. Cula had thought she was quicker, but he gained on her rapidly. If he caught her, he would kiss her. . . . She flew faster. But he won the race. Cula saw his sandy head bending over her, his blue eyes looking down at her. This was the very same Ratty whom she had slapped when he—— There was a flash of amethyst through the air, and Cula's small hand landed on Mr. Dingwall's left cheek with decisive reprimand.

Ratty was staggered. He hadn't expected this. Nor did he propose to be publicly humiliated; he was going to play this game the way the book said. Catching both Cula's hands, he kissed her cheek—then kissed the other cheek.

Things began to happen. A cheer went up from the spectators on the benches, enlivened by cat-calls from the younger boys. Ophelia Dingwall saw red. With a bound she sprang into the mêlée and grabbed one spouse with the firm hand of an outraged wife—which is a very firm hand indeed. Ratty was constrained to follow its behest.

"What are you thinking of, Ratty?" stormed Ophelia, beside herself with rage. "Come right away. Come now. Do your hear?"

Surely Ratty heard, and surely Ratty obeyed; but before he did it, he rolled his eyes ecstatically around the hall and gave everybody a broad grin. It took him a week of steady home humping to erase the mem-

ory of that grin, but tonight Ratty didn't care about future reparation.

This episode established Cula Clare. The slap had vindicated her maidenly dignity; two kisses, when the rules specified only one, had proved her a minx of the Aunt Debbie school; and Ophelia's manifest jealousy had given the final touch to her popularity. Slipping thus easily into the rôle of heroine, Cula quickly overcame the embarrassment which would otherwise have engulfed her. She went on with the game.

It wasn't long before she was tagger again. As she went slowly around the circle, the jocular Lem Tripe saw a chance to add a little spice to the game. He was standing beside Zelotes Joselyn and he noticed that as Cula approached, Lote's head twitched nervously and he rolled his eyes over his shoulder. Said Lem to himself: "Here's Lote dyin' to be tagged, and Cula too bashful. Ain't that a shame?"

As Cula came around the second time, Mr. Tripe dropped Lote's hand, on the pretense of readjusting his collar; and at the exact moment when Cula came up, he tapped his unsuspecting neighbor by a deft circling of his right arm.

Lote believed it a genuine tag. He broke out of the circle and dashed after Cula; and it must be admitted that although he had a dapper manner when he walked, he was far from dapper when it was a question of speed. As a runner, he was neither Apollo nor Mercury. He had a tendency to lurch and lumber, but he covered the ground, nevertheless.

Cula, not prepared for his pursuing her at all, was handicapped at the start. By the time they had raced twice around the hall, she was gasping for breath and

panicky with the realization that it was Zelotes who was stamping determinedly behind her. If he overtook her. . . . Suppose he should kiss her! Oh! Suppose he should refuse to kiss her! Oh! Double, triple Oh's!

A wild impulse seized her to evade the issue. She dashed through the door into the cloakroom and slammed it behind her.

Lote, who had settled doggedly to the task of catching the flying figure in wistaria silk, was surprised by this move but not to be halted by one slammed door. He dashed after her.

Cula Clare was standing with her back to the cloak-hung wall. Her breath was coming quickly; her eyes were full of the fires of excitement; her whole face glowed. It needed no prodding and no Aunt Debbie now to build up an illusion around Cula Clare. She was irresistibly radiant in her own right.

Zelotes had intended to drag her back into the hall, to show everybody how agile and clever he was. But suddenly things were different. They had run out of the glamour of the game. They were just Cula and Zelotes alone in the cloakroom.

"I gorry, Cula," puffed Lote, "you look as pretty's a picture. You look just like a little gray squirrel yourself."

Cula was breathless. She felt giddy. But Aunt Debbie did not desert her even now. "I—I didn't tag you at all," she jerked out, with her new independence.

Zelotes fell back, dumfounded. "Gosh all hemlock! Who did tag me, then?"

"I—I don't know. I thought it was—was queer—your chasing me."

"Well, say," ventured Lote, recovering himself under the stimulus of Cula's new attitude, "say, you didn't care 'cause I tried to catch you, did you?"

Cula Clare's eyes were like stars. "Why, I—I don't know's I did."

Lote's complacency was returning. "That's good, Cula," he chuckled. "Let's go on back. We'll play some more."

But Cula Clare shook her head, as she fancied Aunt Debbie would advise. "No, I want it to stop here. I—I'm going home."

"Are you, now?" said Lote, not in the least disturbed by this. "Well, mebbe I can see you home, then. Seems like you kinda owe me somep'n—runnin' off this way. Couldn't I, now?"

"Why," stammered Cula, "I—I guess mebbe you could."

He held her coat for her. Then he found his coat and hat. As he held the outside door open in his most polished manner, Ratty Dingwall, who had made a spectacular escape from surveillance, opened the other door—from the hall. His eyelids became immobile, such was the steadiness of gaze demanded to absorb the gallant picture before him. Zelotes gave him a passing glance; then followed Cula Clare and closed the outside door.

"By durn!" murmured Ratty.

He turned limply back into the hall.

"Ain't they coming, Ratty?" several voices inquired.

Ratty waved his arm in a downward gesture of flabbergastion. "By durn!" he repeated weakly, and for some time was incapable of further speech.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HAMPTON was roused. A case of distress had been discovered on a small, bleak farm under the brow of Hemlock Knob. The case consisted of a father and mother and nine children, half starved, less than half clothed, the father sick, the mother frail, four of the children in the throes of whooping cough. It was an extraordinary combination of poverty and suffering, and Hampton lost no time in giving aid.

Having provided medical attention and incited volunteer nursing, the village undertook to supply clothing against the cold winter which would soon set in. A notice was inserted in the Itemizer that a sewing-bee would be held at Mrs. Oscar Judevine's. All women were earnestly urged to be present with their thimbles and whatever materials they felt like contributing.

Mrs. Davenway could not go, but she opened her piece-trunk with a generous hand and selected several bundles of cloth. With these and her sewing bag, Heather sallied forth to represent the family.

At the end of Checker Street, she met old Jabez Mears. His thin face and deep-set eyes looked more hollow than usual, she thought. He wavered weakly toward her and stopped. But Heather had already learned how to manage an encounter like this in the best Hampton manner.

"Fine day!" she greeted him, with exaggerated lip work, usually necessary with the older generations in this section.

It wasn't a fine day. It was horrid, with frequent squalls and vicious flurries of rain. But you could always get away with this salutation in the Valley, particularly if you followed it quickly with the remark considered the highest good form for those citizens who had passed their three scores and ten and were "living on borrowed time." Heather slipped this question in at once.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Mears?"

The old man regarded her mournfully. He sighed, shook his head.

"I'm poorly—poorly, Heth."

"Oh, I'm sorry," screamed Heather. "I hope you'll be feeling better very soon."

"I shan't," quavered Jabez. "I ketched cold three weeks ago. Right in summer! Left me with a turrible cough." He gave a short demonstration of the kind of cough it had left him with, and then cupped his large downy ear with a bony hand, to gather in the sound vibrations of Heather's reaction to the news.

"You'll throw it off when the sun comes out," cried Heather, with effusive optimism.

He coughed again. "It's got me," he groaned. "Gets worse, 'stead o' better. My lungs is tender. Ev'rybody says I look turrible peaked. Come the first cold snap, and I'll get pneumony."

Heather had run out of stock phrases. She could only stare helplessly, searching her mind for encouragement.

"My father, he went same way," piped the frightened

voice. "Ketched a cold in August, same's I done; and when the first snow fell, he took down with pneumony. Snuffed him out jest like that." Jabez snapped his thin fingers in apt illustration. "He was three year younger'n I be, too. I'm goin' on eighty-seven."

Heather was bewildered. She comprehended at last that this was no idle conversation; Jabez Mears believed this gloomy forecast and was miserable over it. He was blindly reaching out for the word that would help.

"You don't have to do just what your father did," she shouted desperately. "If you take care of yourself and keep cheerful, you'll be well again in no time."

He continued to shake his head dolefully. "Ev'rybody says I look peaked, Heth. They've all noticed it. They're a-warnin' me. Father, he tried to be careful, too, but 'twan't no use."

Heather gathered up all the cheerful thoughts in her mind and heaped them on Mr. Mears, but she was conscious that sprightly counsel delivered in high C on the public street loses much of its effectiveness.

"Poor old thing!" she thought, as she went on. "He's chiefly scared. I wish I knew how to unfrighten him."

She found the Judevine home buzzing with activity. It was a large house, with a real drawing-room. The latter and the living-room and the library were thrown together today, and they were well filled with representatives from every social circle in Hampton Valley. Incongruously, red flannel and plaided worsted and blue serge appeared on tapestry chairs and trailed over the velvet carpets. Miss Nancy Hobart sat on a gilded divan and expounded philanthropy in majestic tones,

seemingly for the benefit of Mrs. Enos Flumm, who sewed by the day and was not usually seen at a social gathering. Mrs. Styggles, wife of the merchant, presided at the library table, planning and issuing directions based upon the anatomical measurements and reported ages of the afflicted. Mrs. Anna Edgerley, the lady with the whispered past, carelessly brought in a dress pattern so fine and costly that it precipitated considerable discussion as to its suitability.

Like the strawberry festival, it was an occasion that pulled democracy to the surface and flaunted it ostentatiously. Social fences were broken down, and party lines dropped slackly from their posts. Proud matrons plied thimbles with their meekest sisters. Middle-aged women with gray hair and spectacles and shoes that were comfortable and looked it, were ranged substantially around Mrs. Judevine's beautiful rooms, forming a pleasing background for the more lively Hamptonites.

As Heather looked about, it came over her that this was a marvelous gathering, and its size indicated that it represented Hamptor Valley. "What a wonderful spirit!" she thought, in a gush of appreciation. "Kind and unselfish!"

The young girls had collected in one end of the library, where they could pool their gaiety for a congenial audience. Heather joined them and was outfitted with a flannelette gown to be put together for the unknown woman under the mountain who had made the two mistakes of marrying a shiftless man and being too zealous about building up population.

"Baste the seams just's they're pinned," puffed Mrs.

Styggles asthmatically. "Then take it into the dining-room, and they'll sew it on the machine."

Heather basted obediently.

When she had finished, she took the garment into the dining-room as directed. She had to wait, however. Mrs. Tripe was presiding at the sewing-machine, and she was already behind on basted seams, owing to the tingling necessity of keeping informed about juicy items floating in the air.

It was a congenial coterie, formed automatically from a similarity of tastes.

"I told him to make himself some onion syrup and take a tablespoon every hour," Mrs. Si Hoyt was saying.

"Guess he'd better do somep'n 'sides take slops," Mrs. Araminta Pickering broke in tartly. "He'd better see a doctor—and right smart quick, too. I knew 'twan't any time to mince words, so I spoke to him perfectly frank. I says to him, says I: 'Mr. Mears, you gotta take better care of yourself if you want to see turkey for Thanksgivin'.' "

Mrs. Tripe lifted the presser-foot and cast her contribution into the symposium. "He's got a look 'at I don't like. But I done my best to warn him. I told him yist'day, says I: 'Mr. Mears, you hadn't oughter be out. A man of your years can't stand what the young fellers can, and you don't want to get a mite more cold than you've got right now,' says I. . . . Folks tell me his father didn't live to be s'old as he is. Went the same way, too, didn't he?"

"He did," corroborated Mrs. Pickering, taking the words away from Tillie Spinkett, who was anxious to participate but was too young to have first-hand mem-

ory about this piece of history. " 'S what I reminded him of. 'Course I didn't say it right out, but I hinted, 'cause I knew 'twas my duty. I says: 'You gotta remember you inherited weak lungs, Mr. Mears, and a thing that's in the family has gotta be fit constant, or it'll carry you off 'fore you know it. You unnerstand I'm sayin' this for your own good, 'cause I'd hate to see you took down way your father was—and him three year younger, too!' "

They had been too absorbed to notice Heather; they would not in any event have understood why her face should have grown strained, her expression touched with horror. While she listened, she had been thinking of the feeble old man who had quavered his troubles to her, in the forlorn hope of finding human sympathy and encouragement. No wonder he was frightened! These women had taken pains to frighten him; and he knew that what they had definitely expressed, the whole town was thinking. Those other women in the drawing-room—— No, they wouldn't have said these things to Jabez Mears, but undoubtedly many of them were making the same dismal forecast in their thoughts. And Mr. Mears knew it perfectly well, because he knew the mental routine of the village in which he lived. Practically he had been condemned to death by his fellows, who were now waiting to see him execute the sentence which they had imposed.

"How can you talk to him that way?" she burst out indignantly. "Why don't you help him to keep cheerful? Don't you know that men have been killed by fear, and that you're taking the best way to frighten the poor old thing to death? It's murder!"

Murder!

There was a ghastly silence.

Six pairs of outraged eyes were trained on the girl who stood by the sewing-machine and rebuked them with righteous wrath. Messages were got over by social wireless, but nobody said anything. Mrs. Pickering rapped the arms of her chair with her bony fingers and lifted her small head higher from her wide, gaunt shoulders, as if withdrawing disdainfully from the mire of calumny. Mrs. Spinkett rolled her prominent blue eyes in an eloquent pantomime. Mrs. Hillock and Mrs. Flinker nudged each other like bushes swaying in a fitful breeze. Mrs. Fuller's wide shoes shuffled on the floor like a seismograph needle recording the disturbances within. Mrs. Tripe abstractly took up her sewing and measured one seam by another.

It was the silence that marks swift thinking—of Napoleon before a battle, of Alexander the Great before an invasion.

"They'll take me up later," thought Heather, miserably realizing the futility of speech as a moral agent. She sank back into a chair and meekly folded her hands over the pink-and-green flannelette.

"Sakes alive, Heth!" Tillie Spinkett said at last. "What's eatin' you? Somep'n gone wrong to home, I s'pose."

They let it go at that—for the time.

Mrs. Giddings came in. Her friend Minty Pickering was instantly deflected into the pleasant ways of chummy conversation. She began in a whisper. She worked up into low tones. Mrs. Tripe, who had started the machine, ran it more slowly—more slowly yet. The wheel scarcely turned. Mrs. Pickering's communica-

tion, outwardly guarded, was distinctly audible to the entire room.

It was about Mrs. Atkin. Of course she and her husband had been having trouble for a long time, but nobody had known just why. Now—well, facts were leaking out. . . . Somebody went in one day. . . . found Mrs. Atkin in tears. . . . Got the whole story. . . . 'Twan't any wonder they'd quarreled. . . . You couldn't blame Mr. Atkin——

Mrs. Pickering warmed to her subject. She entered into details before a rapt audience. She stripped Mrs. Atkin's life, struck it into pieces, and burned those pieces on the pyre of gossip. Possibly she had forgotten Heather; more probably she believed that the girl could not hear.

If they had enacted a deed of physical violence before her eyes, Heather could not have been more shocked. Her cheeks burned. She felt guilty, as if her chance presence had made her a participant in treachery to a human being.

She could finish this garment at home. Certainly she could not stay here. She rose softly and stole out of the room. But nobody turned or noticed her going.

She found Mrs. Judevine and made her excuses, hardly conscious that she was arresting the activity of the entire drawing-room by her excited manner, inadequately explained by the fact that her mother might be depending on her assistance. She ran down the steps and fairly raced along the maple-shaded street.

She felt disgusted, nauseated. That beautiful house! For that matter, this beautiful village, the charming spurs of the Green Mountains that encircled it, the

streets shaded by noble trees, the wide river that curved through the valley and slipped over frequent falls in its rocky bed! Beauty! The most perfect beauty—that was what it looked to be. And yet through it wound the slimy serpent of malicious gossip, contaminating everything, sending its poison fangs into human souls.

At the corner of Main Street she ran into Clif Stanleigh. She would have passed him with a nod if he had not stepped in front of her.

"What has happened, Heather?" he asked in concern.

"Oh—why—nothing has happened, Clif," she panted. "I've been helping them sew for the Larbee family."

He nodded. "And did you meet the harpies?"

She stared at him in astonishment. His penetration amazed her. This was the good old Clif of her childhood. Her gratitude went out to him in a warm glow from those distant days. "How did you guess?"

He smiled. "It's in your face. You're telling the village, Heather."

"Well, I can't help it," she exploded. "I've no sympathy with Hampton Valley. It's a wicked place—wicked all through."

"Oh, no, it isn't," he contradicted gently. "They're not all harpies by any means."

"Practically they are," she flashed back. "If they weren't, they wouldn't allow——"

"There are some mighty fine people in Hampton Valley," he continued, as if she had not spoken. "There's your mother. She's one of the finest women that ever lived anywhere."

"Oh Clif!" Her shoulders dropped. Self-condemna-

tion swept her anger into contrition. Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh Clif, you know I didn't mean all I said. Of course I appreciate mother. But I never think of her as a part of Hampton Valley. She doesn't belong here."

"I think she does, Heather. It's the Mrs. Davenways that are the hope of the Hampton Valleys. We can't afford to let other places have them."

Heather did not contest this view, but she did not agree with it. Why sacrifice people like her mother and Mrs. Judevine and the Bigelows? She had to admit that they were apparently not touched by the unwholesomeness which at the moment seemed to her the dominant characteristic of the town. But on the other hand, they had no power to check the moral cannibalism that had been revealed to her this afternoon.

As she went on toward home, the resentment which had been temporarily allayed by Clif's understanding sympathy, flamed into renewed life. When she approached the Atkin home at the corner of Elmwood and Checker, she shivered with a feeling of guilt. Never again would she go past that house with her former happy carelessness. Against her will, there would flash into her mind the tragedy behind those lace-hung windows. She would never be able to root out that knowledge to which she had no right, to which nobody had any right, but which Hampton Valley had forced upon her.

The hideous part of the whole thing was its irrevocability. The secret which had been wrung from Mary Atkin in an unguarded moment of agony and undoubtedly under a pledge of strictest confidence, had been whispered from lip to lip. It was all over town. Every-

body was repeating it, deducing, magnifying. Quite possibly Mrs. Atkin would never learn that her confidence had been violated, but she would have no privacy hereafter. She would never again walk the streets of Hampton a free woman. She had shared her reserve with one supposed friend, and all Hampton had pounced upon her and torn the flesh from her bones, devouring it with ghoulish gusto. People would speak to her of this and that, and all the time in the back of their minds they would be nursing their looted knowledge, keeping it alive, pinning her actions and words to it, speculating endlessly, predicting, condemning.

Their essential cruelty to Jabez Mears had been awful enough, but this was even worse.

How could she, Heather Davenway, ever bring herself to live in a place where these things were possible? Suppose sadness, tragedy, were to come into her life. Would she be called upon to share the most sacred miseries with every human being that walked past her door? She would certainly never be able to compass that double emotional life which is the only safeguard of one's reserve in the small town. It is not strange that the old Puritanic stoicism persists in the cold, phlegmatic manner of the average Vermonter; it is the protective covering from the needle jabs of his fellow-citizens, the hardened epidermis that shields the tender flesh from stinging blows.

Having lashed her feelings to a high point of indignation, Heather burst into the kitchen like an avenging fury.

"Mother!" she cried, flinging her sewing bag on the table, near which Mrs. Davenway was picking over the

blackberries for a shortcake. "Mother, why did they ever abolish the stocks and the pillory and the ducking-stool? I want every one of them back again this minute."

Mrs. Davenway's quick glance was tinged with dismay. "What under the sun—you look as if——"

Heather sketched the afternoon, throwing in her own opinions liberally. "Mother, they eat one another," she finished. Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes blazing.

Mrs. Davenway gently dropped a handful of blackberries into the bowl and smiled indulgently at her daughter. "Sometimes," she said slowly, "I think it would have been better if you'd never gone away, and sometimes I think you'd have been happier if you hadn't come back. Seems like changing about has mixed you all up, and you don't really know where you stand."

"But I do. I know exactly. That's why——"

Mrs. Davenway's calm eyes contradicted her; then she went on with other matters. "Not that I'm defending gossip! There isn't any defense for it. But if you think for a minute, you'll see that it comes from the interest folks have in one another. It goes a little too far; that's all."

"I should say it did!" stormed Heather.

"But folks must have excitement," continued Mrs. Davenway placidly. "Why do you think you like city life? It's the excitement that gets you, no matter how much you cover it with high words. You like the bustle. You see other people rushing around and doing things, and it gives you the feeling that you're doing something pretty tremendous yourself. It's like standing close enough to the falls to get wet with the

spray, but really you don't have much to do with sending the water over the rocks.

"Don't you see, Heather? You crave the feeling that crowds of people can give you with their schemes and interests and activities. Well, Hampton craves it, too. But it's such a small place that there ain't very much going on. So the folks have to make their own excitement, and they get it out of one another, because there isn't anything else to get it out of. Only trouble is, sometimes they go too far—and that's gossip."

"Yes," agreed Heather violently, "it's gossip that's unkind and cruel and——"

"Dearest, wait a minute. Think before you——"

"Why, I have thought," interrupted Heather, laughing suddenly. "That's why I am so sure. I made up my mind about gossip a good while ago. And when I have convictions about anything and feel them very strongly, then on that subject I'm shavings, and any match will set me off."

"This match made too big a fire, dear," expostulated Mrs. Davenway gently. "I'm certain that you're unjust to those women. They're really kind-hearted, and they mean well."

"H'm!" intoned Heather, radically unconvinced.

And for exactly twenty-three hours she held to her arraignment of Hampton Valley.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT three o'clock the following afternoon Checker Street developed a flurry of alarm. Mrs. Araminta Pickering, prancing out of her yard, chanced to meet Mrs. Bill Capron. They spoke briefly; then hurried into the Spinkett house. Mrs. Lem Tripe rounded the corner and dashed after them. Mrs. Davenway was there just ahead of all three.

It was Tillie Spinkett who had issued the summons. She had telephoned Mrs. Capron for advice about the infant Eddie, who was not well. Tillie didn't feel well, either. She didn't know why; just didn't. Then she had called up Mrs. Davenway, who received this sketchy message:

"Say, Mis' Davenway, can't you—I——"

Tillie's voice stopped. Over the wire came two thuds: that of the receiver banging against the wall; that of a person falling.

Mrs. Davenway had torn out of the house like an intelligent tornado.

They found Tillie in a faint on the dining-room floor. Only after they had saturated the air with camphor, smelling salts, and sprinkles of cold water, did she open her eyes and begin to revive—even then in a disinterested manner.

Finally they got her to bed and summoned Dr. Martin. But before he arrived Mrs. Minty Pickering,

being practical and of a logical turn, had risen nobly to the occasion.

"Tillie," she demanded in a tone of authority, "what have you et?"

"Just—dinner," gasped Tillie, with a despairing roll of her prominent blue eyes. Her face was the color of a green-gray winter cloud that threatens snow, but Mrs. Pickering pursued her relentlessly.

"Yes, but what did you have for dinner? Give us the mainyer."

Prodded persistently, the miserable Tillie revealed a menu to appall even the stout courage of the New England housekeeper, who is wellnigh fearless in her defiance of dietetics. It seemed that Tillie had collected a little spread of boiled potatoes, fried salt pork, milk gravy, sour pickles, fried apples and onions with catsup, mince pie, suet pudding, and ice cream.

"The puddin' was—left over," she jerked out, as if its origin had anything to do with its ultimate effect. "And Ham, he brung the ice cream 'thout—my knowin' he meant to."

"Um-mm!" Mrs. Pickering's thin lips closed over this comment. "Very well, we'll perceed on that basis."

So they proceeded diligently, and when Dr. Martin came he took up the struggle along similar lines. When he left, there was a small stand drawn up by Tillie's bed, bearing a box of tablets and two tumblers, each topped by a small saucer and a spoon. Under one of the tumblers was a folded paper, jotted with a prescription which was to be filled in case harrowing symptoms should supervene.

From that point, the women took charge. By means of the telephone they organized themselves into shifts,

which would give necessary attention to their respective households and run Tillie's along at the same time. When Mrs. Davenway returned home, Heather went over to see what she could do.

In the kitchen was Mrs. Capron, a motherly woman with a plain face and a heavenly smile, battling with the infant Eddie's indigestion. "Poor little feller!" she crooned. "Acts like he wisht he didn't have any stomach 't all."

Heather, feeling incompetent here, stole softly upstairs and peeped into Tillie's room. Tillie, faint and gasping, was writhing weakly and panting for breath. Beside her sat Minty Pickering, patiently wielding a palm-leaf fan and counting Tillie's pulse. When she looked up, Heather offered by pantomime to take her place, but was dismissed with a decisive shake of Minty's head.

Downstairs again, she overtook Mrs. Tripe extracting a hot-water bottle from the sitting-room cupboard. They went into the kitchen together. Cula Clare Leathers was coming in from the shed with some kindlings and an armful of wood.

"The fire's gone out," she said to Mrs. Tripe. "The water's warm in the teakettle, but you'll want it hotter."

"Hurry it all you can, Cula, no matter if it does take a lot of kindlings," returned Mrs. Tripe. "We might as well plan 'bout tonight while we're waitin'. Ham doin' heavy truckin' all day, can't be broke of his rest; but us women, we can camp down tomorrow and get a snooze mebbe. Minty declares she'll stay through till Tillie's up and around again, but we'd oughter spell her through the night. I gotta set out

some supper for Lem and the young 'uns, and then I'll come——"

"I'll stay," interposed Cula, rattling dampers with a professional hand. "I'll get Ham's supper and——"

"I'll stick by Eddie," volunteered Mrs. Capron. "Mebbe Mrs. Flinker'll take turns with Minty; and if not, Mrs. Fuller——"

"Oh, let me help," broke in Heather eagerly. "I came over to help."

They looked at her in surprise. Their eyes swept her appraisingly, with indulgent tolerance.

"I'll bet you never nursed anybody in your life," said Mrs. Tripe, not unkindly. "It's more work to tell a person than it is to stick 'round and do it yourself. Besides, Heth, your mother'll be needin' you. We'll get along."

Heather flushed. She felt at a disadvantage. It was true that she knew nothing of nursing; it was true that her mother needed her. She felt chagrined over her inadequacy, but stronger still was her appreciation of the consideration and the self-sacrifice of these women. They weren't thinking of themselves at all.

"Oh, you are good," she cried impulsively, overwhelmed by contrition for her hasty judgment of yesterday. "Oh, how good you are!"

They stared at her now in astonishment. They no more comprehended the reason for this outburst than yesterday's group had comprehended her disgust. They were doing their duty. It was all in the day's work, and they didn't think about it the second time.

But when Heather had gone out and softly closed the back door, they looked at one another and smiled.

"Queer girl—Heth!" commented Mrs. Tripe. "She's a pretty thing, but jumpy."

"She'll settle some when she gets a home of her own," said Mrs. Capron generously.

Heather would scarcely have resented these characterizations if she had heard them. She was busy flagellating herself with the lash of remorse. In her detestation of the scandal, she had overlooked the fact that gossip may spring out of different soils. For once she had been too swift in her conclusions.

Yes, she had certainly been wrong yesterday. Those women had gone too far with Jabez Mears; they had gone much too far with Mrs. Atkin; but her mother was right about their intentions. They were only pursuing excitement too earnestly, only carrying their normal interest to an extreme that they didn't themselves realize. Because they were really kind-hearted! They were amazingly unselfish. She could criticize; oh, yes, she could criticize. That was an easy thing to do. But when an emergency arose, she was the one who was useless. Those whom she had judged and found wanting were the ones who knew how to translate their human interest into action, knew how to submerge themselves before the need of others.

How fortunate she was that she could live in Hampton Valley for a time! Nowhere else could she find so genuine a spirit of kindliness.

She wakened in the night and twisted her head to look out from the side window. There was a light in Tillie Spinkett's room. A shadow flickered across the shade—that of a gaunt woman with a small head. It was Minty Pickering. She was patiently on watch—

not held by relationship or hope of reward, but only by the goodness of her heart.

It was wonderful!

The next morning Heather saw different sets of women going in and out, taking turns in their responsibility, carrying mysterious offerings held carefully under snowy napkins. By afternoon it was reported that Tillie was comfortable and sitting up. Mrs. Gilman would stay with her, in case anything was wanted, but the others were excused.

When Mrs. Davenway came home, Mrs. Pickering, Mrs. Tripe, and Mrs. Hoyt came with her for a few minutes' chat and relaxation after the strain.

Heather flew to usher them into the sitting-room. They seemed to her like returned heroes, bearing the scars of honorable battle. She felt that she wanted to do something for them, to expiate her misjudgment.

"I'm going to make you some tea," she said with effusive hospitality.

There was boiling water. She filled the teapot, cut a lemon, brought out the cube sugar, poured cream into the pitcher with lavish generosity. She carried in the tea things on a tray and dashed back for a plate of hermits.

"I don't know what's to become of Tillie," Mrs. Tripe was saying as she returned, "'less she shows more sense. Honestly, if you ask me, I'd say she hasn't got the brains of an angleworm. Wa'n't nothin' ailed Eddie but wrong feedin', and as for what Tillie had et for dinner—well, good land!"

"I should say!" chimed in Mrs. Pickering, dropping two slices of lemon into her tea. "'Twas that suet puddin' 'at upset her, I'll bet my new washboard. You

hadn't oughter eat suet puddin' and mince pie to once. Seems as if anybody'd know that—that is, anybody but Tillie. We all know what she is."

Heather passed the hermits rather limply.

"She didn't have any bringin' up," panted Mrs. Hoyt, who was always short of breath. "Don't you remember her mother? My grief, I never saw such a place as Tillie's pantry. I was huntin' for some curr'nt jell to go with Tillie's toast, and land of Jerushy, you should ha' seen them upper shelves. Somep'n had leaked, and all the jell glasses was a-sozzle." Mrs. Hoyt sucked in a mouthful of tea with gratifying appreciation and summed up her findings. "Tillie's as smooth as silk when you meet her out, but you ain't really 'quainted with any woman till you've had a look at her pantry shelves."

Heather's eyes were wide and unbelieving. She was still waiting on the guests attentively, but the balloon of her enthusiasm was drooping toward the earth.

"Tillie's doing better all the time," said Mrs. Davenway cheerfully. "She had a lot to learn, because nobody ever helped her much; the point is, she's learning."

"H'mm!" responded Mrs. Pickering, accepting the second hermit. "Seen any signs of her learnin' much about bedclo'es? She had a very decent gown—I give her that; but in all my years of settin' up, I never see such beddin'. I stuck the hot-water bottle straight through a hole in the sheet twice. And the quilts—well, take my word, I'd ha' swore the dog had chewed 'em."

"I didn't shirk my moral duty," put in Mrs. Tripe, stirring her tea vigorously. " 'Fore I left, I told Tillie what's what. I says to her, says I: 'Now, Tillie, 'f you wanter raise that young-un o' yours, you gotta feed

him simple. If you feed him fried pork 'fore he's two year old, you're likely to lose him any time,' says I."

"If he lives to grow up," threw in Mrs. Hoyt cryptically, "it'll be 'cause his time hain't come."

"My stars, I'm sleepy," admitted Mrs. Pickering.

Heather felt that she must contribute something. "It's no wonder you're sleepy, Mrs. Pickering. You were awfully good to sit up all night that way."

Minty glanced at her in profound astonishment. "Why, that wa'n't nothin'. I'd do that for anybody. If a feller's sick or in trouble, I couldn't close my eyes 'thout I'd done what I could for him."

Heather sank into a chair and found nothing more to say.

CHAPTER XXXV

HAMPTON had developed grave doubts about Henry Nye, fearing that he lacked judgment. Instead of capitulating to the high points of the village, he was showing an exclusive concern in the affairs of one of the most unpromising citizens, Clifton Stanleigh.

It was true. The lonely man felt strongly drawn to Clif. The more he probed into the boy's problems, the more interested he became; the more he probed into the attitude of the town, the higher his partisanship flamed. Here was a young fellow who needed encouragement and support and the heartening stimulus of human trust, and what was he getting? His own town had shrugged him out of consideration as never likely to succeed because he had not already succeeded.

This stirred a fierce sympathy in Henry Nye. Contrary to his expectations, he determined that for the present he would stay here in Hampton Valley or in touch with it. He had been looking for an occupation that would absorb his thoughts and tax his ingenuity, and to his surprise he found it right here in Hampton.

"Now this factory idea——" he said to Clif one day. "I'm going to investigate the possibilities. If you don't mind, I want a few of your models. I'll take them down to New York, get some advice on them, and try for a market. I particularly want that marble game; I'll

bet that's the king-pin. And I think I know just the men to approach. If they like these models and give me encouragement, then we'll do some planning. But first we might grab up a factory site, so we'd have it in case we wanted it."

Clif regarded him in amazement. He was not accustomed to men who spoke as lightly of acquiring a factory site as of selecting a new necktie.

"Why, Mr. Nye, it might be a total waste of——"

"Nonsense! It's a handy thing to have, anyway. No harm done, even if this notion doesn't work out. Let's get about it this afternoon. I'd like to leave tomorrow morning."

Clif watched him go out of the store. Then he turned back into his dingy office, crushed by a despair that he would not have confessed to a living soul. He appreciated this man's warm friendliness and effort to help him to a brighter future, but, after all, that future seemed far off and inconsequent compared with the exigencies of the present. It was only a matter of days now before his period of redemption on the farm would expire. He did not know how long it might be before Ward would be in a position to help him, and he had withheld the exact date of the mortgage foreclosure the year before, so that Ward would have no worrying obstacle at home to add to his anxiety about his own work. Clif had sold this store when Mason entered college and was now only renting it. He had nothing left except his stock of goods, and he owed a few bills on that.

Nevertheless, he could not say to this friend who was trying to assist him: "What I need is help right now—today. I don't care a hang about the future unless I can pull through to reach it."

Pride forbade that. A man who has no securities to offer has no courage and no right to ask. So Henry Nye went ahead with ambitious plans for years to come, and with no suspicion whatever that their object was facing the final dispossession of his home and consequent disgrace before the town.

On this same forenoon Mr. Zelotes Joselyn made a most interesting announcement to Railroad Street by stepping dapperly into the jewelry store of Mr. Elias Leander Grobar and asking with expansive pride to look at ladies' engagement rings; also wedding rings. This double request incited the most spirited rallying from Mr. Sam Hillock, the "turrible joker," who had playfully followed his friend into the store "to see what was doin'."

"I gorry, Lote," chuckled Sam, "if you got so speeded up as this, wha' makes you stop at two? 'Lias here, he's got a-plenty of rings, hain't you, 'Lias?"

Mr. Joselyn waved him down with a magnificent gesture. " 'Lias hain't got but one engagement ring, kind I want. 'Cause what I want is the biggest and best in Hampton. See?"

Everybody saw—with bulging eyes. Mr. Joselyn did indeed select the best gem in Mr. Grobar's tray—to the delight of all those immediately concerned, and ultimately to the entire Valley.

"Gosh!" commented Mr. Hillock, by his amazement temporarily bereft of jokes. "Gosh!"

"Yes, sir," gurgled Mr. Joselyn proudly, "I got ketched at last. The fair sex—the sly, sweet things—they ketch us."

"Well, say, Lote," prodded Sam Hillock, "you hain't told us yet which one ketched you."

"Which one?" Mr. Joselyn turned on him in assumed umbrage. "Let me tell you, Sam, there ain't but one lady in this town that I'd look at, and that's Miss Cula Clare Leathers. I tell you, boys, she's cute. She kept me a-workin' hard to get her, 'cause she was for livin' there alone as she always had; but, I gorry, I was tickled to work hard a-persuadin' her. Every man he oughter settle down."

"Ye-uh, Lote, it's sure time you settled," agreed Sam, preceding his friend out of the store, to enter upon the civic duty of spreading the announcement as soon as possible.

Mr. Joselyn, having delivered the engagement ring, swung jauntily homeward, tapping his cane into the sidewalk with a grander flourish than ever. As he approached the Davenway house, he saw Heather, who had just come back from a trip toward Hemlock Knob with Wylie Chamberlain. She was going up the path.

"Hi, there, Heather," Lote called to her. "I got somep'n to tell you."

Heather came back. "You look as if it was something pleasant."

"You betcha," subscribed Zelotes. "It's goshdarn pleasant. But it proves you ain't so smart as you thought you was, that day you got sassy to me. 'Member you said Cula Leathers wouldn't have me? Well, she's goin' to have me, 'cause I asked her. Seems she worships the very ground I walk on." With his cane Mr. Joselyn tapped the sidewalk, as being the immediate object of Miss Leathers's devotion.

Heather's dark eyes widened in an astonishment that did her credit. "You don't mean it, Mr. Joselyn! What a surprise this is! But I'm glad for both of you."

"You better be," grinned Lote, whose lurking resentment was banished by this congratulation. "Aa-uh, we're goin' to be as happy as two little birds on a branch. Tell you secret, Heather, if you won't tell nobody but your mother. We're goin' to be married to the parsonage tomorrow. Leave tomorrow night on the swellest trip you ever heard of! Some s'prise to the town, eh? Don't nobody know it. Gosh, there ain't another woman I'd have except Cula. She's so cute! Only thing you got right, Heather, was that a man oughter settle. A bachelor's life is lone and drear. He'd oughter settle, if he wants to know what 'tis to be happy. I gorry, he'd oughter."

Heather flew into the kitchen to carry the wonderful news to her mother.

"Aren't you glad?" she exulted. "I wish you could see how happy and flattered the old beau is. Now if I can only make Miss Leathers understand that she must never for one moment forget Aunt Debbie, they ought to be blissful forever and ever."

"It's fine," agreed Mrs. Davenway, somewhat absently, as she salted the soup she was making.

"I thought you'd be delighted, mother."

"Yes, dear, I am delighted. But I'm pretty busy this morning."

"Is Mr. Ransome worse."

"He seems to be suffering some," replied Mrs. Davenway evasively. On a tray she arranged the soup, some buttered toast, a dish of pudding, and the tea service. Then she took up the tray and went briskly out of the room. There was no hesitation in her manner as she climbed the stairs, balancing the tray skillfully, but a

woman of less courage would have quailed before her task.

Nobody would ever know how hard the last two weeks had been. Only her compassion had enabled her to endure them at all. Never once had she wavered in her faithful care; but the harder she tried to make the patient comfortable, the more she was stormed at and cursed or treated with surly antagonism. The natural tumult of disposition that comes from sickness and suffering did not account for Booth Ransome's attitude. He treated her as if she were an enemy.

As a matter of fact, he felt that she was one. It was no wonder she was puzzled, because Ransome did not understand himself. He was a battleground of violent emotions, from which he made no effort to seek results or conclusions. As soon as he had emerged from the days of wildest agony and had realized his situation, he had been furiously rebellious. Instead of being thankful that he stood a chance to come out of this accident with the full use of his body, he was insanely resentful that he would owe that physical integrity to a woman whom he had scorned as foolish and credulous and whom he had deliberately deceived and cheated.

In the climax of his victory over her, why should he have been struck down and thrown upon her mercy? And why should it have been only her intervention that had prevented the amputation of his arms? Why couldn't he have been indebted to anybody else in the world?

He knew for himself that it was Mrs. Davenway who had saved him; he knew it again from the nurse. When the latter had left, he had been wild at accepting Mrs. Davenway's ministrations, but again he had been

powerless. He could not demand a nurse from Hampton, because there chanced to be none available at that time; he could not demand an expensive nurse from a distance, because he had lived too closely to the edges of his income to feel independent with the uncertainties ahead. If he were able to meet all his other expenses, he would do well.

On this particular morning he had been more irritable than usual. He had had a bad night, with spasms of pain, and every added hour of this enforced immobility was added torture. When Mrs. Davenway had moved the stand from the head of the bed toward the foot and had laid out on it the materials she would need in dressing his wounds, he turned on the pillow and watched her with a smouldering rage. As she bent over him, washing the wounds through the "windows" in the plaster, his burning eyes were fixed on her fine face, in which the very tenderness and compassion kindled his anger. He wondered what this childlike woman would say if she knew how he hated her.

"They look better every day," she said encouragingly. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Ransome, to have such good resistance."

He ground his teeth and said nothing. She had spoken with no thought of her own part in his recovery, but he chose to think she was taunting him with what he owed to her.

"The casts will come off pretty soon," she continued, "and then you'll think you're almost well."

"Oh, shut up!" he exploded. "Do you think I'm a fool? I know how long it'll be before I'll get out of this confounded hole. Damn it all, I'm tired of that babble about 'being well pretty soon.'"

Mrs. Davenway worked in silence for some time. Finally, when she was pushing the sterile dressing out of the test tube over the wounds, she spoke again, thinking to allay the anxiety which it had occurred to her might be the cause of his irritation.

"Mr. Ransome, the final payment on that land will be due next week, and I want to say that you aren't to worry about it. If you still want the property, you can pay for it later. That may not be the legal way of doing things, but it'll be satisfactory to me. I don't want you to worry about anything."

She was a little surprised that he made no reply whatever. Glancing up to see why, she observed that his face had become fairly livid. Momentarily she shrank back before the active savagery in his expression; then recovered herself with a sense of shame. For the moment, it had not seemed possible that this man was helpless. But why should he feel toward her the way he looked? She no more understood the workings of his mind than he could understand hers. She had thought that he would be relieved not to lose the deposit and not to lose the property if he still wanted it. Instead, he was manifestly enraged.

His blazing eyes were fixed on her face. Swiftly his expression changed, as if forces were gathering which must find an outlet. The impulse became ungovernable. Without warning, he thrust one foot out of bed and struck at the stand that held Mrs. Davenway's materials, a glass of milk, a pitcher of water, and the silver bell which had been brought up from the dining-room—now that Ransome could move his fingers—and was under his hand when he was left alone. The whole thing crashed to the floor. The muffled clatter of

breaking glass was pierced by the jangle of the silver bell, instantly muted.

Mrs. Davenway did not start. She had had no chance to avert the catastrophe, and her calm fingers finished the dressing as if nothing had happened. Her remarkable poise infuriated Ransome still further. If she had complained, he would have been ready with vituperations that would have been a normal relief, but her composure provoked him beyond endurance.

It took her some time to clear away the wreckage and clean the floor, and before she was through he was in the ugliest mood she had had to deal with. Mrs. Davenway would not have believed it possible that her patience could have fed his passionate anger. And she was far from suspecting that her complacence about the river property had been the goad which had particularly roused him.

When the village man came in to relieve her, he stayed an hour or more with Ransome, recounting the news. Mrs. Davenway, passing through the hall, heard Ransome laugh, and it came over her sharply that he treated no one else as he treated her. She wondered if he felt freer to vent his convalescent irritation upon her because he knew her better, or if there were some deeper reason for his outbursts. This speculation was in her mind when Heather made the announcement about Cula Clare and Zelotes, and she was still working on it when she mounted the stairs with the lunch tray.

She had to feed Ransome, a service which he bitterly resented. He complained that the soup was too hot; and when she apologized, he swore copiously but with-

out point. He refused the toast. She urged him to try the pudding.

"Oh hell!" he stormed. "Take the damned stuff away —and yourself with it. Leave me alone. Darn' quick!"

Mrs. Davenway made no reply. Quietly she gathered up the lunch things and carried the tray downstairs. In the sitting-room she found Minty Pickering, who had pranced in for the latest news.

"How is he, Eleanor?" she inquired greedily.

"I think he's gaining," replied Mrs. Davenway judicially. "He's taking more interest in what goes on."

Minty's interest fell a trifle, dampened by optimism. "I guess you'll wish he never'd set foot in this town," she snapped. "You look all wore out right now. Besides, everybody thinks he's a dark horse somehow. I hear it talked a good bit."

Nobody ever questioned Minty's having heard. Mrs. Davenway set down her tray and they chatted for a few minutes in peace.

Then the silver bell rang imperiously from above. Mrs. Davenway excused herself and went up at once.

"Get paper and pencil," Ransome commanded curtly.

Mrs. Davenway had written several letters for him. She went over to the dresser and got a fountain pen and a tablet of letter paper. She sat down, wrote the heading and date; then she waited. Finally he gave her the name of a man in Springfield, and the address. She wrote these down, and after a long period of silence she added, "Dear Sir." Minutes passed, and he still said nothing further. The silence was so prolonged that it grew uncanny. Into it the small alarm clock ticked with exaggerated resonance.

As often before Mrs. Davenway was conscious of some mental struggle in this man, so powerful that it made itself felt without words. At last it seemed to her that she must try to help him.

"What shall I write?" she prompted, in a low voice.

He burst out at that. "Write what you damn please," he roared. "I'm through."

She could not control her amazement. A cold shiver of fear ran over her, as it crossed her mind that this man was possibly losing his reason. A terrible red had come up in his face, submerging the unhealthy pallor with an even more unhealthy surge of fury.

"They want water power," he choked out. "That man and his company—they'll pay five thousand."

She was tremendously relieved, and yet oddly free from surprise. All along she had had an intuitive apprehension of the streak of uprightness in this man's nature, and she had relied upon it, trusted to it in a way that had seemed foolish to those around her. Now her belief in his honesty had called that honesty forth from beneath the ignoble qualities that had overlaid it.

What Mrs. Davenway never understood was that Ransome had not wanted to be honest. He had desperately wanted to be dishonest, and he was furious against her and against himself because something would not allow him to take the final step and cheat this woman to whom he would owe the use of his arms and perhaps his life itself.

When she tried to express her gratitude, he cut in on the words.

"That five hundred I paid you—will that be enough to cover this whole darn' flop?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "I think just about. And I thank you for this name. I knew you would do what was right."

The color left his face, and through its ghastly pallor his heightened rage burned white-hot.

"Damn you! Get out of my sight. Get out!"

Mrs. Davenway folded the paper and went softly out of the room, closing the door gently behind her.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"GO slowly, please," said Heather, as Wylie swung his shining new car from Checker Street into Elmwood Avenue.

He smiled at her affectionately. "I thought you always wanted the world to move on lively wings."

"Not today."

"Why not today?" he prodded lazily.

"Because it's a beautiful morning—and I'm happy. I wouldn't stir things a particle if I could have my way. I'd keep them just like this forever."

"The present is mighty satisfactory," he agreed indulgently, "but I'm looking forward. You aren't afraid of the future, are you?"

"Oh, no, but—well, you know what I mean. I'm sure of the future with hope, but I'm sure of the present with certainty."

They had struck into the country road that led toward Hemlock Knob and he pulled the car down to a mere crawl, as she had requested. He liked to humor her in every whim, but he didn't exactly understand——

"What are you getting at?" he asked, with a shade of perplexity.

She turned wide, innocent eyes toward him; then she laughed mischievously. "Nothing stupendous. Just indulging in idle chatter. You get so used to

hunting for evidence and hidden hints that you expect them from me, too."

The perplexity faded out of his expression. "Maybe I do. But good heavens, sweetheart, it's appalling to hear you speak of the future as if it looked like a dangerous wilderness in which you could only hope for the best. To me it's got a look that's highly satisfying. I wouldn't change places with anybody in the whole favored county of Spinooski, let me tell you. I'm going to build a fine little home for the finest girl in the world, and I've got the tracks laid to give her everything she can want—even luxuries in a darn' short while."

She sighed in absolute content; then she told him what he was waiting to hear: that he was wonderful, that he would probably spoil her, as she hoped he would, and that she appreciated how thoughtful and kind he was.

They purred along in silence for a time, enjoying the pleasing picture of the future; enjoying, also, the crisp September air, so clear and rarefied that everything stood out with startling vividness. Facing them was Hemlock Knob, soft and dark with firs. The first tokens of autumn greeted them now and then: the brakes growing sear, a maple branch bitten red by a light frost.

"How far are we going?" asked Heather at length.

"About six miles. Have to see a man on business."

That didn't sound interesting. Heather did not pursue the subject. "I love this car, Wylie. I feel as if I were sailing on a down puff."

"Never saw that done, kiddie. 'Tis a pretty slick car, though. I paid money to get a good one."

"I'm afraid you're mercenary, Wylie. Do you know you're always talking about money?"

"Am I?" He seemed surprised; then he shrugged good-naturedly. "I didn't realize that I gave that impression. Well, I'll never be a miser, but I've got my eye on a few things that only money will secure. So have you," he added, with a sly glance.

"I? Why, Wylie Chamberlain, you big fibber! I scarcely ever think about money at all; you know that. I——"

"Oh, surely you ignore the word," he taunted, "but you've got the tastes that call for considerable substance. Would you be caught wearing an ill-made suit or a shabby hat? Do you plan to furnish the new house with flowered carpets and figured plush and six-inch gilt picture frames? Do you like this car, or would you rather I'd exchange for the little tin cup that we're about to meet?"

"Oh Wylie," she broke in—and there was a note of dismay in her voice— "you make it sound horrid. I'm afraid it's true that I——"

"Bless your dear sweet heart, Heather, I love you all the more because you have those very tastes. Don't think I'm criticizing. I love you because you are just what you are. Lord knows how I came to be lucky enough to find you. Why, if you'd been one of those glittering-eyed females in a mannish suit and square-toed shoes who never goes in for anything more frivolous than a hand-wrought chain of oxidized silver and who believes she's divinely called to reform a sinning world—well, you wouldn't have made any hit with me. I used to see those creatures when I was in college, usually nosing around for a Ph.D. that they could use as

a club to beat some reform movement into greater speed, and I'd say to myself: 'When I get ready to get married, I'm going to pick out a woman that won't care a hang whether society gets improved or grows worse, but will be out for a good time and all the happiness going.' Well, by George, when you came back this summer, I thought you looked like the very one; and the more I saw of you, the more I realized that you had the qualities I'd been dreaming about."

"Folks say," she reminded him demurely, "that when you can analyze the reasons, you aren't properly blinded by romance."

"Aw, folks say!" he jeered. "The folks that talk are the ones that don't think. There's nothing in that nonsense about love's being like a dose of belladonna in the eyes—blurring everything so that you aren't sure what you're seeing. Would you be flattered if I said: 'I love Heather Davenway because—well, I can't imagine why'? Or do you like it better when I can give a list of reasons that would knock anybody speechless with conviction?"

She laughed. "Oh, knock them speechless, by all means. I only didn't realize that I'd been tabulated in this logical way, and I'm frightened to think that you've probably discovered things that I don't recognize. It's true that I'm no reformer. I haven't the courage, and I never could keep my interest focused on one field. I shouldn't have any faith in jabbing my little toothpick in to hold back the stream of lava that had started down the slope—nor should I care to join an army of toothpick-jabbers. And you're right that I want to be happy. I want to be happy more than I want anything else, I believe. But—and now watch me draw

a bad black mark on the red-ink list—I am terribly critical. There are lots of places that I couldn't be happy in—that is, for any length of time," she modified quickly. "I want to choose the place that I'm to live in and I want it to suit me, and then——"

"Naturally," he agreed before she could finish. "It's a person's privilege to pick out the environment that is congenial. You're like Hampton in holding to that."

"Like Hampton! I, like Hampton!" She was astounded.

"Sure. Hampton has decided that Hampton is the dandiest town in the world, and so it's perfectly satisfied to settle right down in Hampton and be contented."

"Upon my word!" she cried, and broke into a gale of merriment. "That's what I've criticized most severely, and it never occurred to me that I'm groping for the very thing that Hampton has found. Only do give me credit for wanting to 'settle' in a different way. I want to be active about it—not slump and get apathetic and self-satisfied. And I'm not going to admit that I worship money—not for a minute."

"I didn't say 'worship,' " he reminded her. "I said you liked the things it would buy." His cool gray eyes brightened with whimsicality. "In humble moments I fancy the main reason you accepted me was that you didn't want to be told No Funds with an official rubber stamp."

She took up the banter. "You're wrong. That wasn't the reason at all."

"What was it?"

"Spark."

"Spark! Spark? How did I come to owe him so much?"

"Well, you see," she returned, with colossal seriousness, "I've been getting more than ever attached to him since I came home. I found I couldn't go back to New York and leave him, and the only solution was to stay here and keep him."

"Merciful heavens, am I engaged to Spark, too?"

"Mm-hmm," she nodded. "He's expecting a stall in your new garage."

"Well, think of that!" cried Wylie, in mock martyrdom.

The nonsense lasted till Wylie drew up by the side of the road in the shade of a maple tree. "I'm going to leave you here. I shan't be gone long. You can see the house where the man lives—with the elm in front of it."

"But why don't you take me with you?" she asked in surprise.

"Because it's pleasanter here than it is in that yard," he told her, as he slid out of the car and closed the door. "Besides," he added, his eyes tender and full of pride at the same time, "they aren't used to having fine ladies drive up. They'd run from one window to another and stare. You wouldn't like it."

She was content with this explanation. There really was no point in her going to the house when she didn't know the people and had nothing to do with the business interview.

"You'll be perfectly safe," he called back. "And anyhow, you can run the car as well as I can."

She watched him walk briskly down the road. How straight he was; how vigorous! She felt a thrill of pride. He was wholly satisfactory, she reflected—but not a very ardent lover. Sometimes for a fraction of

a second she felt that she belonged in a neat little category with his car and his business and the house he was going to build; but always with an amused smile she admitted that this is the usual category for a woman to drop into—if indeed she is lucky enough to rank with those other possessions. And, at least, she knew that she was at the head of the list with Wylie. She felt sure of his devotion, but it was of a quiet variety, only occasionally flaming out of cool restraint.

It suited her, though. She hated mushiness. There was Ted Stevens in college. He had shown her how much she hated it. For a month he had shadowed her with abject adoration; and then one day when they were walking together he had reached the languishing stage, leaning toward her and babbling hyperbole. . . . He was wearing a brown suit; his hair was glossy brown. As she glanced into his lovelorn brown eyes, she had suddenly laughed in his face: "Oh Ted, I wish you could see yourself. You look just like a chocolate cream on a warm day." It was romance shivered with one blow. Nothing routs it more quickly than laughter, Heather thought with a smile. She had been crude, of course, but Ted had taught her that she loathed spineless emotionalism. Wylie's way was preferable.

She picked up the magazine which he had provided for her. How thoughtful he always was! She flicked the pages; then dropped the magazine in her lap. She had no wish to read about other people's lives; she was lazily content to think about her own life, smoothly shaping itself into a pattern that pleased her—not the pattern that she had expected when she came back to

Hampton Valley, but one that promised to solve the problems which had troubled her.

A raking sound roused Heather from her musing. She glanced around toward the crossroad. Two women were coming, each dragging a heavy sack. As they approached the car, they caught Heather's mildly curious scrutiny and stopped. The older woman was thin and sunburned; her famished skin was wrinkled; her hair, a lifeless gray. The other, a girl about Heather's age, seemed already slipping over the edge of youth toward the same wrecked maturity that her mother had reached. Her face was strained; her deep brown eyes had the harried look of a hunted deer.

There was about them so dismal an atmosphere of wretchedness that Heather felt she must speak to them; it was only human.

"Have you been gathering something?"

"Butt'nuts," replied the older woman briefly. "Had to gether 'em early."

They continued to stand there, staring at the costly car and at Heather, in her smart hat and modish coat, with the new magazine lying carelessly in her lap—staring as half the world stares at the other half over the top of an impassable barrier. Heather felt the meaning of their gaze, and it made her vaguely uncomfortable.

"It's a wonderful morning," she bubbled, not intending to patronize, but speaking nevertheless in the tone that bridges a gulf. "I never saw Hemlock Knob more beautiful."

The older woman was moved by this. Her faded eyes swept over the fir-covered ridge in front of them. "'T always looks like that in September. It's 'cause

the air's clear. It's purty in winter with the snow on it, and it's purty all summer, even when the rain sorta mists it out. Fifty year now I've watched it. Seems like I couldn't get along without it."

"Well, you don't have to, do you?" asked Heather lightly.

The woman's eyes came back from the mountain and focused on the girl in the shining car. "It's the last fall I'll ever see old Hemlock," she said, with the apathy of one whose grief is so close that it crushes. "Lindy here, mebbe she'll see it again sometime, 'cause she's young and mebbe there's somep'n ahead for her. But when you get as old as me, you don't get out again. If you once get in, you stay in."

Heather's eyebrows twisted in perplexity. What was this poor old creature talking about?

"What do you mean? Are you——"

The old woman nodded. "Goin' in a few days now."

"Where are you going?"

"A place you ain't likely to know. It's over beyond Moon Holler. It's up under a mountain, but 'tain't purty like Hemlock. We gotta go. It's my sister's farm, and her husband's dead, so it gives us a chance to pay our way, workin' for her. Pa's consid'rable slow since he had the sickness, but he hain't give out yet, and there's a lot of work left in me, I expect. We gotta go."

"But why?" persisted Heather. "Why do you go if you've always lived here?"

Resentment had kindled in Lindy's eyes. She looked from her mother toward Heather with something of violent protest.

But the old woman was not resentful. She went on

with the same apathy. "We lost our home here. We got in debt with the sickness and all, and the frost killed the orchards. We got in bad luck all 'round; and pa, he's kinda broke. He ain't young any more. We gotta go in a few days."

Apparently she was dazed by the disaster. She had told her story mechanically, as if numbed out of feeling it keenly; and now that she had told it, she took a new hold on the sack and started on. The girl followed her.

But Heather could not let it rest here. "Oh," she cried out, in a burst of sympathy, "can't something be done? It seems a shame."

The girl Lindy turned suddenly and spoke for the first time. Her thin body shook with anger. "What do you know about it?" she threw out fiercely. "You talk. What do you know about it?" Her blazing eyes shot fire at Heather in the luxurious car; then she hurried on after her mother.

Heather sank back, aghast. Why this outburst, this bitterness? What did they think she had done? She watched the two figures plodding down the road. Distance seemed to obliterate the difference in their ages. Now they both looked old and bent, dragging their sacks wearily, with the sodden despair of the overburdened and the downtrodden.

Of a sudden, Heather's eyes flew wide; her body grew rigid. . . . The women were turning in by the elm tree, just as she had seen Wylie turn. . . . She saw it all in a panoramic flash that darted ahead of definite thoughts. . . . But he couldn't—Wylie couldn't—crowd these people out of their home.

Something black dropped over the fair morning,

over the fair future that she had been visioning. It cut off her breath. She must do something—something to lift that blackness and restore the confidence on which her joy had rested.

She slid over into the driving seat and threw in the clutch. She dashed down the road and into the yard beyond the big elm, as if a matter of minutes would straighten out these tangled lives.

The noise of the car brought Wylie to the door. He rushed out on the veranda.

"What is the trouble?" he cried.

"Nothing—much. But aren't you through?"

"What has happened, Heather?"

"Oh, I want—aren't you ready?"

He was relieved, but perplexed. "I will be, in a minute." He went back into the house. There was a sound of voices. Then he came out and got into the car. He did not speak till they were on the road again; and when he looked toward her, his face was stern.

"I didn't suppose you had nerves, Heather. Do you mean that you made all that commotion over nothing at all—just because you got impatient?"

She was more frightened than ever by the displeasure in his tone. She had fled to him for an explanation that would quiet her, and he was criticizing her for doing it.

"Those women," she faltered, "those women—with the sacks! Do they live there?"

His cool gray eyes searched her face. "Yes, they live there. Why?"

"I talked with them, Wylie. Are you—are you going to take their home?"

A flush of anger rose in his lean cheeks. "I am not

taking it," he said, with scornful emphasis. "It's mine because they can't keep it up."

"Oh, but, Wylie, the woman has lived there for fifty years."

"What of it? It's a God-forsaken hole."

"But it's her home, Wylie. It's her home."

"By Jupiter, that's it, is it? So she pulled the sob stuff, did she? Confound her picture!"

"Wylie," she panted, "you're talking about a poor old woman who is broken and discouraged and heart-sick. She didn't pull any sob stuff. I could see for myself. Oh, how can you be so unfeeling as——"

"Unfeeling, eh? So I'm unfeeling, am I? A ravening wolf, I suppose!" He controlled himself with an obvious effort. "Heather, you don't know what you're saying. You're overwrought. If I'd known you couldn't separate sentiment and business, I wouldn't have taken you near that place."

"No, of course you wouldn't," she broke in explosively. "You didn't intend to take me near it. I know now why you left me under that tree. You didn't intend to let me know what kind of business you're in. You knew I wouldn't approve of it."

"I know that it's none of your affair. You've no right to meddle."

"I don't call it meddling. I've a right to know about your business."

"You've no right to meddle," he stormed at her again. "My business is my own; and, by criminy, I'll manage it as I darn good and please!" He jerked the throttle open and pressed a firm foot on the accelerator. The car ate up a hundred yards at one gulp.

"Oh, my gracious!" groaned Heather to herself. "This is a quarrel—and we aren't married yet. If we were married, it would be worse. Oh, this is awful."

For two miles they blurred through the air at a rate possible only in a cop-less country. Then abruptly Wylie slowed down to the pace of a placid cow, and turned toward Heather with a softened expression.

"I beg pardon, little girl," he said tenderly. "I was a brute. I don't do that very often; but to think that my dearest could criticize me, fired all the temper I've got. Now let's talk it over and see what's bothering you."

She drew a breath of relief. "Why, Wylie, it's those poor people. I feel so sorry for them!"

"Well, of course you do," he acceded indulgently. "I'm sorry for them myself, but there isn't anything I can do for them."

"Isn't there?" she said wistfully. "Couldn't you let them stay?"

"No, I couldn't. Nor would it do them any good. I've given them more time than they could expect, and they only run further behind. They haven't much strength, and no pep—no capacity to manage anything. They'll be better off to leave. Nesting in with their relatives and all hands pulling together, they'll just about make a living. And after they've once made the break, they'll be happier than with debts hanging over them."

Heather was silent, turning these arguments over in her mind. Wylie went on in a tone of tender explanation.

"You see, Heather, there's a sound psychological reason behind the opposition to women in business.

If a woman is truly feminine, she comes out just as you have this morning. Her feeling gets in ahead of her brain, and she flies off in a spasm of emotion."

An odd thought slipped inconsequently into Heather's mind. Wylie was describing the sort of woman that her mother represented, and she had been sure that she herself was not at all like that. Wylie was putting her in the same category to which she had assigned her mother. Could it be possible that to outsiders they gave the impression of belonging to the same type?

"You and I can't change the scheme of civilization, dearest," he continued. "There must always be the people who can manage, and the people who can only follow. If you went around rearranging the world according to your personal sympathy, you'd haul all the miners out of the coal mines, all the trainmen out of the subways, all the piece-workers out of the factories; you'd haul all the leaders down from their high places and pull all the plodders up to a level that would make them dizzy. I've no doubt you have some utopia in your mind, like thousands of other deluded, kind-hearted people; but I tell you, Heather, you can't make people equally independent and equally prosperous, because they're created unequal—both in intelligence and in ability.

"Now you think I'm cruel, but listen! It's up to me to get a higher rate of interest than the banks can give me, isn't it? Well, then, I lend my money to people like these Trasks that have just wrung your heart. I lend it to them when they're down and out, and thereby give them a chance to get on their feet again."

"But, Oh Wylie, think of the interest they pay you!"

"Well, my dear child, that's all right. It's worth something, isn't it, to be given another chance? And I give them that chance. Now if they've really got any managing ability, they save up money and pay me back, and I've done them a service. If they haven't any managing ability, they've no right to try to run anything. They belong to the rank and file of workers and followers, and in the long run they're happier to be in the class that they belong in."

"Maybe," she agreed doubtfully, "but it seems as if——"

He interrupted to drive his advantage a little further. "What really got you, Heather, was that sob story about leaving home—where the robins sing in the maple trees, and all that sort of stuff. But it isn't a genuine home feeling to want to stay in one spot seventy-five years because you've stayed there fifty, to want to drink out of the old oaken bucket because you drank out of it when you were a child. That isn't home feeling; it's inertia. In plain words, it's habit. And if you like the hidebound habit that characterizes some of these Hamptonites——"

"Oh, I don't like habit, Wylie," she confessed, with a shaky laugh. "That's one thing that I don't like about Hampton. I suppose you're right about poor old Mrs. Trask—that she wants to stay in the groove because she's used to it. . . . But the daughter is young. Do you suppose she inherited the habit, till she feels as settled as her mother does?"

Wylie thought that a very probable explanation.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AS Heather thought about this episode with the cooler judgment that came from perspective, she found less reason to blame Wylie for his resentment. She had dashed into the Trask yard with the spectacular disorganization of one who gives an alarm of fire. Small wonder that Wylie had been humiliated by her apparent lack of poise, as well as by her lack of confidence!

By afternoon she had decided that the occurrence had been a fortunate one. She understood Wylie's viewpoint better than before; his careful explanation of his methods and his reasons had enabled her to take the same angle. And his analysis of her had been correct, too—that she had had an emotional flurry. But ultimately his patient exposition had brought her back to her usual standards, and she had agreed that rationality must rule, that the whole system of the world would go to pieces if feeling took the helm.

She could now see the significance of her outburst. It meant that for a few minutes heredity had caught her back to itself; she had reverted to those unguided impulses which she deplored in her mother. It must not happen again. It was contrary to the safety of that new individuality which she had evolved for herself, and it could very easily destroy the happiness which the future was about to give her. She and Wylie

would never be joyfully contented with each other unless they agreed on fundamental principles.

She could not expect him to change his business tactics to suit the notions of another person, and especially of a person who really knew as little about business as she did. It was therefore a tremendous relief that she could subscribe to those tactics after a few hours' reflection.

Everybody in Hampton who possessed health and the income to afford a vacation, had had one and come back home, reporting a fine time and good fishing. When Heather went down town to do a few errands, she met twice as many people as in the weeks preceding.

Mrs. Anna Edgerley, the lady with the Past, stopped a minute—very handsome, very smart in a white linen suit with long jet necklace, and a black feather in her white hat. She told Heather that the Mutual Culture Club was to have an organization meeting the following week.

"Of course you will join the club now, won't you?" she asked with a charming smile.

"Oh, yes, indeed." This was part of living in Hampton Valley, but Heather spoke as if she anticipated great bliss from the privilege.

"Then come and help us next week," urged Mrs. Edgerley. "The club is going to take up a systematic study of the twenty greatest poets."

Heather's eyes sparkled. "How is the club going to decide on the twenty?"

"That's what this meeting is for. A committee was appointed to suggest a list, but it will be subject to discussion. The trouble is that the committee members don't agree on the twenty. Some want to put in

living poets, and some don't think a poet is great until after he is dead."

Heather smiled. "A good many people think a poet isn't until after he was. I'll come and listen, even if I can't help."

They laughed together in a congenial understanding.

Heather was finding the town far more friendly since her engagement. The wary uncertainty of the villagers had vanished. Since she had cast in her lot with theirs, they were freely genial, honoring her with intimate trivialities denied to the outsider. Mrs. Ham Spinkett intercepted her to ask if she could borrow the paper pattern of her blue muslin; Sam Hillock, from the doorway of his Quick Lunch, called out a facetious inquiry as to whether this weather suited her or whether he'd better order some other kind for her; Mrs. Warren Buttles, the leading milliner, graciously admired her hat, only her professional reputation compelling her to comment that the trimming was a mite far back according to the latest reports from the centers of style.

On the way home she met for the first time Lizzie Nelson, one of the village outcasts. Lizzie had worked for Mrs. Davenway years ago, and Heather remembered her for her patience and good nature.

"How do you do, Lizzie?" she said cordially. "It's been a long time since I've seen you, but I've never forgotten how good you used to be to me."

Lizzie's heavy, simple face lighted with pleasure. The village had long since agreed that she wasn't very bright, but had never seen in that fact any reason for pitying rather than coldly condemning. Heather had been warned, at least a dozen times, that she must not

speak to Lizzie on the street. It had seemed to her the narrowest of all the narrow prejudices she had encountered, and it had been a vast satisfaction to find that her mother did not endorse the warning.

"I didn't do nothin'," said Lizzie, hugely gratified. "You was an awful nice young'un and I liked you."

"I was a daily trial," contradicted Heather lightly, "but you were always good natured. I've never forgotten how you glued together all the playthings I smashed."

"Oh, it wasn't nothin'," disclaimed Lizzie, fairly overcome. "I liked to do it."

When Heather reached home she came into the kitchen with the total result of two hours' socially interrupted shopping in Hampton Valley—a package of meat, a ball of twine, a quarter of a pound of nails, not the right length but only one size shorter, and two spools of silk that almost matched her samples.

Mrs. Davenway, mixing fishballs for supper, called to her from the pantry.

"Heather, dear, I've done something."

"Your record is better than mine," laughed Heather. "What have you done?"

"I've sold the water power."

"What? My gracious!" Heather leaned rather limply against the door jamb and stared at her mother in astonishment. "You've sold—sold the water power! Are you sure it wasn't a dozen cucumbers? You speak as if it was a light, easy job. Did somebody come along inquiring?"

"Just that. Somehow, Heather, I knew it would work out, 'cause there ain't any problem so difficult

that it hasn't got an easy solution if you hold yourself steady."

"But, mother, I don't believe you yet. Who bought it?"

"Mr. Nye, who's staying at the hotel."

"Well," admitted Heather, "I suppose if he was in need of any water power, he could buy it." Nevertheless, the news was so surprising a piece of good fortune that she could not banish her incredulity while she plied her mother with further questions.

And as Mrs. Davenway reviewed the afternoon, it seemed to her equally amazing. Clif Stanleigh had brought Mr. Nye to the house and introduced him; and as soon as he had left, Mr. Nye had broached his errand directly, with no clever subterfuges or diplomatic wrong leads. Mrs. Davenway had liked that.

"Is your water power for sale, Mrs. Davenway?"

"I should be very glad to sell it," she had replied quietly, matching his frankness with a total lack of shrewd reluctance.

"What is your price?"

"Whatever it is worth to the buyer." And at the twinkle in her eye, her caller had laughed in genial appreciation of her candor. "What I mean is this, Mr. Nye: Until lately there hasn't been any demand for the water power, so I haven't had occasion to fix a price on it. I came near selling for the value of the land without regard to the power, but——"

His eyes were twinkling now, and he took the sentence away from her. "But if someone wants the power, your price would be higher than for the land and the power together?"

She laughed outright. "I suppose that's it. That is business, isn't it?"

"It is," he agreed, recovering his gravity. "It is the implicit part of it."

"We don't have any implicit in Hampton, Mr. Nye. Everybody knows about the offer I had and they've probably told you, so I couldn't conceal the amount if I tried. But if a person can use the water power, it would seem to me fair that he should pay more than a person who would have to leave it idle. I have been referred to a company that is supposed to be willing to pay five thousand dollars for my property, but I haven't yet had a chance to get a letter written. I didn't hear about it till this afternoon."

Mr. Nye nodded as if the situation was now clear. "If I doubled that amount, would it appeal to you as an attractive offer?"

"It would, very," she assented, with a gasp of astonishment. "Attractive, but perhaps too high. There are many falls up and down the river, and that lessens the value. I don't know——"

"This particular site is the one I want," he interposed; "and if you think that price is fair, I'm willing to pay it."

"It seems to me more than fair," she admitted with a smile.

"Then would it appeal to you further to have the papers made out early tomorrow morning, and to receive a check for the amount at that time? I want to take the morning train south."

"It would, very much," acknowledged Mrs. Davenway.

"I don't think," commented Heather, when her

mother had sketched the main points of this interview, "I don't think you were very business-like. You put yourself entirely at his mercy."

"I fancy," said her mother, patting a fishball with thoughtful care, "that it is a very safe mercy to trust yourself to. Mr. Nye is an unusually fine man."

"Is he?" responded Heather abstractedly. Accustomed to her mother's swift and favorable judgments, she scarcely attended to this one—at the time.

Mrs. Davenway set aside the plate of fishballs and assembled the ingredients for gingerbread. Now that she and Heather ate alone—because Booth Ransome had not yet been downstairs—cooking was no longer a hurried, wholesale process, but a source of the greatest delight.

"If you'll just sit down and be comfortable, Heather, there's something I want to talk over."

Heather threw off her hat obediently and brought a chair within range of the pantry door. "Ready!" she said gayly, as she seated herself. She was so cheered by their astounding good fortune that she did not apprehend anything disquieting.

Mrs. Davenway did not speak at once. She measured a cup of brown sugar into her mixing-bowl, added the butter, and began to cream them. Then she became motionless, staring down at her spoon with transferred intentness. "When I get that money tomorrow, I want to lend part of it to Clif Stanleigh."

"Mother!" Heather leaned forward, gripping the edges of her chair.

Mrs. Davenway did not lift her eyes. "I want to lend him enough so't he can save the farm. He'll lose it in a few days unless something happens, and I can't

bear to have his home go. If he had sold it, it wouldn't have seemed so bad; but to lose a home on a mortgage is a sort of disgrace 'round here, you know. I loved his mother, and Clif has always seemed very close. I know you don't think he's doing very well, Heather, but I can't tell you what that boy has been to me all the time you've been away. Scarcely a day's passed that he hasn't been around to see me—till you came back. And my heart aches to think he's losing all the home he ever had."

"How much is the note—or the mortgage?" asked Heather in a strained voice.

"I don't know, with the interest and all, but it must be well under two thousand."

"Mother!" Heather started out of her chair, her dark eyes kindling with astonishment and protest. "Mother, you don't mean that you'd throw away two thousand dollars to save that little grubby, scrubby old farm?"

Mrs. Davenway turned slowly and looked at her daughter with sad earnestness. "The farm has run down, Heather, but it's worth a great deal more than that. And I wouldn't call it throwing the money away, anyhow, if I could save the boy's home, would you?"

"Yes, I would. We haven't money enough so that we can do things like that. Of course I'm sorry for Clif, but that farm's all run to pieces and it isn't much of a home. Besides, we—that is, you—can't afford it."

Mrs. Davenway continued to look at her gravely. Her fine face was full of sadness, of compassion, and of disappointment. She gave the impression of weeping, but there were no tears in her dark eyes.

"I shan't do it, Heather, if you don't agree. That property is in my name, but I consider that you have an equal right to what it brings."

"Oh dear!" Heather was distressed now, and rendered somewhat uncertain before her mother's ready accession to her wishes. "Oh, my gracious, why do folks get into such fixes? Goodness knows I'm sorry for Clif, and I wish we could do something; but don't you see, dearest, how impulsive this would be? You plunge on reckless sympathy, and I really feel that you ought to think it over more. That's Clif's home, to be sure, but he'd soon get used to living somewhere else and probably be better off. There are always managers and workers, you know, mother, and Clif seems to have proved that he isn't fitted to manage."

How glad she was that Wylie had explained these matters to her carefully, had given her own rationality the support of his! It made her more sure of herself in expounding the real meaning of this crisis in Clif's life.

"It isn't good for people to stay in the same place always, mother. That isn't genuine home feeling; it's habit."

"Habit!" exclaimed Mrs. Davenway, suddenly fired with indignation. "How can you say such a thing as that? The home feeling isn't any more a habit than personal affection or kindness. It's one of the most sacred safeguards of social life. A person who helps break up the home feeling in anybody, under the impression that it's a habit, is killing part of the human soul."

"Mother!" Heather's cry rang through the room.

The color dropped out of her face; she swayed as if from dizziness. "Don't say that!"

"Why shouldn't I say it? I can't let you get such wrong notions. As for Clif's not being able to manage, don't anybody know whether he can manage or not. He's never had any chance. And let me tell you, dear child, you can't go around glibly dividing people into managers and workers till you've given them every possible bit of leeway that sympathy and encouragement are capable of."

"Don't say that!" cried Heather through white lips. "That isn't true—oh, that is not true!"

She wheeled and stumbled out of the room, as though she could not see clearly.

Mrs. Davenway looked after her in puzzlement and dismay. As she reviewed her own words, she could not understand why Heather should have been so deeply moved. She chided herself for having spoken too forcibly, under the stress of her sympathy for Clif and her shock at finding that her sympathy was not shared; but that did not explain why Heather should have appeared to be vitally wounded. Her anguish over it increased.

The subject was not mentioned when Heather came downstairs an hour later. She appeared to have regained something of her poise, although she was still pale and dispirited. The supper which Mrs. Davenway had prepared with affectionate forethought was a sorry meal for both of them. Mrs. Davenway longed to take the girl in her arms and love her into happiness again, but there was a proud aloofness in Heather's manner that kept her at a distance.

Three miserable days followed, and still they came

to no understanding. Heather stayed in closely, spending long hours in her room. Mrs. Davenway heard her refusing invitations over the telephone, giving various excuses. Beyond going out twice with Wylie in the car, she scarcely saw anyone.

On the fourth day Heather herself broke the terrible constraint that had gripped them both in its spell of suffering.

"Who holds Clif's mortgage?"

"Who? Why, Wylie Chamberlain. Merton Hobart held it originally, but Wylie got it on a deal of some sort."

Heather had grown rigid. "Wylie?" The name was hardly more than a whisper.

"Yes. I thought everybody knew, but of course you haven't been home long."

For minutes Heather stood staring at her mother with a dazed expression, as if she could not move, could not speak. Somehow she had not suspected that Clif was in Wylie's debt; and although it made no intrinsic difference who held that mortgage, the fact that it was Wylie had suddenly reduced a strictly business equation to painfully personal terms.

At last Heather turned without a word and went out of the room. She got her hat. Mrs. Davenway saw her going down the path. Never before had there been any sort of break between them. Neither knew exactly what was going on in the other's mind; but they both felt that a situation had come upon them which, in spite of their deep devotion, had wrenched them very far apart.

Heather had started out without purpose, on the impulse to be alone and to walk off her restless per-

plexity. In the open air she might be able to break through the mist of personalities and see only the sane side of the whole problem, as a sensible person should.

She walked out Black Cherry Avenue. Suddenly she stopped, held by a compelling idea. She stood a moment in deep thought; then she turned and retraced her steps. She went into the house, up to her own room. Five minutes later she came down again, carrying her wrist bag.

This time she went out of the yard with a firm step. There was resolution in her face, confidence in her whole bearing.

"Now," she said to herself, "now they can make way for Heather."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DURING these four days of perplexity and consequent seclusion, Heather had not been down town, nor had she been in a mood to listen to any village news, even from her mother. She was therefore astounded and shocked when she noticed that the shades were drawn in the windows of the Stanleigh General Merchandise and in the glass panels of the door. Behind one of the panels was a crude sign which read, "Closed."

Was Clif approaching bankruptcy? And would he have been saved from this extremity if she had allowed her mother to help him? It appalled her to think that she might have been indirectly responsible for an exigency which the village considered a personal disgrace. She longed to ask somebody just what those drawn shades meant, but she was too much disturbed to ask the question casually. She preferred to wait till she got home.

She entered the Gorham Block opposite and climbed the long stairs to Wylie's office. In the outer room she encountered Gracia Ward, the stenographer. Wylie was occupied, but would be free in a few minutes.

Heather sat down to wait. She had only a bowing acquaintance with Gracia Ward, and she had no desire to talk, anyhow. She was absorbed in her own thoughts. As she sat there quietly, her eyes fixed abstractedly on

her ungloved hands and on the wrist bag in her lap, it flashed over her that she was wearing the same sand-colored gown in which she had come to Hampton three months before. Three months! What a change they had made in her and in her plans! Her eyes were held by the splendid ring on her finger, the symbol of the most surprising change that these few months had brought.

The inner door opened and a man came out. He glanced at Heather; then turned and gave her a searching scrutiny. His face seemed familiar, but Heather was sure she had never met him. He was dark, evidently French; he looked like a farmer of the more prosperous type. Heather passed him and went into Wylie's private office.

He greeted her affectionately, but with a shade of surprise. She had been here only once before, and that when he had brought her on an inspecting tour. So he felt that some definite purpose lay behind this visit.

Heather glanced appreciatively around the pleasant room, lined with books and furnished simply but in excellent taste. She approved the plain, massive desk; the rich rug under her feet; the heavy, severe chairs. The sunshine streamed in at one of the windows. It was quiet and serene here. How much easier to sink into this quietness and serenity than to disturb them, to run the risk of shattering them altogether!

She did not know how to begin on her errand. The curious scrutiny of the prosperous farmer recurred to her mind.

"Who was that man—the one that was just in here?"

"That man? Why, that was Jacques Larue."

"He looked at me as if he thought he knew me," she explained.

"Everybody knows who you are—now." He threw her a tender look across the desk, but there was no mistaking the implication that it was her status as his fiancée to which he referred. "He has a farm up towards Hemlock Knob."

"Oh, and is he borrowing money?" There was no reason for her question except that Hemlock had recalled the Trasks. She wondered how many farmers came to Wylie for loans.

He laughed. "Heavens, no! You've got borrowing on the brain. Larue's got money enough. He's going to buy some property that I hold."

A sudden intuition tore across her brain. "Is he going to buy the Trask farm?"

"Yes, he is."

She knew that he was not pleased by the question, but he answered it readily. She watched the frown that gathered on his face when she failed to drop the subject.

"Isn't it a shame, Wylie, that he couldn't have wanted it before? Then poor Mr. Trask could have sold it and have saved something out of the wreck."

Wylie said nothing.

"He didn't want it before—did he—Wylie?" There was a breathlessness in her voice, as if her hope and her fear were too closely balanced.

His frown deepened; he studied her intently.

"Wylie, did he?"

"What's got into you, Heather?" he said impatiently. "You quiz me lately as if I were a witness on the stand. I thought you understood all about the Trasks. That

old duffer couldn't sell earthworms to a fisherman that was looking for bait. To tell you the truth, I doubt if Larue would have realized how much he needed the Trask farm if I hadn't prodded him judiciously. It's brains that pulled the trick. Old daddy Trask hasn't got 'em, and that's his misfortune."

Heather's color wavered. "Old daddy Trask is a human being," she said slowly.

"Well, good Lord, Heather, so am I! And I should be glad if you would consider the Trask episode closed. It certainly is so far as I am concerned. I should suppose you could see that it was only an incident of business routine."

"I do see," returned Heather in a suppressed tone. She sat there for several seconds without speaking again, pressing her lips firmly together, struggling for the cool self-control that she needed for her real errand. She felt that her little universe was whirling, that it offered her nothing to cling to. Before Wylie had taken over the Trask farm, he had paved the way for selling it. By his superior acumen he had usurped the opportunity that might have come a little later to Mr. Trask—or might have been passed along to him and still have left Wylie a high rate of interest on his loan. Why hadn't she guessed this before?

She might have known that no lawyer with manicured nails, and his feet on a Persian rug, would know how to make a prosperous farm out of an unprosperous one —or would care to try it. And of course this transaction was not unique; there were probably scores of farms that she knew nothing about . . .

Wylie had taken up a pencil and was pretending to figure on a piece of paper. This tacit hint that she was

interrupting his business hours, showed her how deep his displeasure was. And she had not yet made her request. Instead of leading up to it, she had antagonized him. She forced herself to speak quietly.

"There's one thing that ought to encourage you, Wylie, about explaining things to me. At least, I can understand them. And I didn't come to ask you about the Trasks. I came to ask a favor."

His face softened. "Well, that sounds more like my darling little girl. What will you have—a box of chocolates, or a ride to Broomfield?"

Her heart lifted. "Oh, it won't mean spending any money, or much time," she said, almost gayly. "Just two or three strokes of your pen, or nothing at all—I don't know which. You see, mother is terribly distressed about Clif Stanleigh. You know how intimate the families have always been," she hurried on, unconscious that she was overdoing the explanation in her eagerness not to offend. "Well, mother told me about the mortgage and that the time for redemption has almost expired, and Wylie, I—I came to ask you to extend the time."

His eyes narrowed. "For mother, I suppose?"

She flushed. "Wylie, don't you dare speak of my mother in that tone. . . . We'll leave her out of this. Call it that I came because I wanted to come."

"Doubtless that has the advantage of honesty," he said, with a faint sneer. His scorn steadied her into her usual self-possession.

"Will you do it, please?" she asked pleasantly.

"Do what?"

"Extend the time or waive proceedings—or whatever you call it."

He laughed again—not in amusement, but in contempt.

"Heather, when you stay in your own province, you're the finest girl I ever met; but when you step over into my province you're at a disadvantage. You don't know anything about business, and it makes you seem foolish and ignorant. I may as well tell you right now that I don't like your interference. I admire you at home and in society, but I don't admire any woman who goes butting into any office. No normal man does. Can't you imagine how it looks to me when you come in here and ask me to move the statutes around or take the business machinery to pieces and put it together again to suit your whims?

"Evidently the time has come for us to have an understanding on this point. I agree that marriage is a partnership—but one in which the partners have distinct fields, and each partner should stay in his own field and have a free hand there. I should not think of interfering in the management of the house; I cannot accept your untrained dictates in my profession. It is intolerable."

She had taken this harangue so calmly that he had carried it further than he had intended. He had not an irascible nature; in fact, many people had known him for years without discovering that he had any temper at all. But Heather had touched the two most sensitive points: his professional pride and his personal jealousy. He was inordinately proud of his success; and he was secretly jealous of the long-standing friendship between Heather and Clif—only too ready to believe that the friendship was as deep as ever and really inimical to him.

Heather, however, had given his speech only a superficial attention. In the urgency of her purpose, she ignored all of it except the last phrases.

"I am not trying to dictate, Wylie," she said sweetly. "I warned you that I was asking a favor, which I should not think of doing very often. But Clif and I have been friends since we were babies. I understand that he can survive the loss of the farm, but you know that the disgrace of losing a home on a mortgage is an awful thing in Hampton Valley. It's the disgrace that I'm thinking about. All three of us were children together, even playmates together sometimes, and we ought to help one another now. I'm trying to do my part by asking something that it's hard to ask. Won't you do your part by assuring Clif that—that he can have more time—somehow?"

Wylie's lips curled. "Mawkish sentiment!" he scoffed. "Now listen! There is no such thing as extending the time. The period is fixed by law, and nobody can change it. Nor am I injuring Clif personally. A man that can't stand up and take the vicissitudes of business without sneaking around to some woman to plead for him, isn't much of a man anyhow. Business is business."

She stiffened. "You are very much mistaken if you think that Clif has spoken to me about this." Her straight look was a reprimand, but immediately she forced herself to the ways of conciliation again. "It's only a few days that I'm asking for. Evidently you haven't heard that Ward's play is succeeding. In a short time he will be able to help Clif."

Wylie did not stir. His head bent slightly forward, he was gazing intently at Heather, as if his cool gray

eyes were probing for a motive not confessed. As she met them, the hopes that she had been building up, scattered and dropped to the earth. A chill ran over her.

"Doesn't that make a difference, Wylie?"

The ghost of an unpleasant smile crossed his lips. It was a smile that acknowledged the difference, but acknowledged also that the difference tipped the scales in the wrong direction. Heather's fingers clutched the velvet bag in her lap. She choked for breath.

"Wylie," she begged, in an undertone that was ghastly with suffering, "wouldn't you help Clif when he would pay you back in a few days? Haven't you that much human sympathy?"

His lean cheeks flushed with anger. "Does it mean so much to you?" he burst out. "Why does it mean so much to you?"

She gasped. "Clif—Clif is my friend—and he's in trouble."

"Oh!"

Momentarily Heather could not see her course clearly. Her thoughts refused to take shape. She seemed to be tossed from the bayonet point of one feeling to the bayonet point of another. Every word that was uttered had for her a double meaning. Nominally the discussion concerned Clif, but in reality it was boring sharp, irreparable holes in the future that she had supposed was to be hers. Her lover had vanished. His body sat there in the chair opposite her, but some other spirit had taken over his brain and was speaking from his lips. How could this hideous thing be?

The pink had dropped out of her cheeks, and her breath came hard. Her fingers were cold; they trem-

bled as she opened her bag and drew out two bank books. They represented her small checking account and all her savings—a bequest from her aunt in California, supplemented by small amounts from her salary—and totaling a little over eighteen hundred dollars.

"We won't discuss this point further," she said, with great dignity. "I will pay the mortgage. How much is it, with the interest?"

"I don't remember." He was furious.

She did not glance at him. "Will you look it up, please?"

Hearing no movement, she raised her eyes. His face was distorted by a passion for which her opposition was no explanation. It was mad jealousy that she read there. Oddly enough, although part of the agony of this problem had been the personal element, she had not foreseen that Wylie would twist her partisanship into so crude an interpretation. She resented it, and her resentment made the situation easier. The man that glared at her across the desk was a stranger for the time being.

"Will you look it up, please?" she repeated, in a tense voice.

Wylie moved then. With a twitch of his shoulders, he turned and opened a drawer. He made a lengthy pretense of finding the data. He read off in a biting monotone, "$1723.78."

Heather took out her fountain pen and filled in an order form for the total amount of her savings. . . . His eyes burned with a cold fire as he watched. His lips were twisted, as of one who awaits the moment of triumph. . . . She opened her check book. As she stopped a moment to compute, he spoke.

"A check is not legal tender," he flung at her scornfully.

"Do you mean that you won't accept a check from me?"

He shrugged. "You came here to teach me business. Allow me to remind you that a check is not legal tender."

Heather had been bewildered and full of agonizing fear, but now for the first time she was angry. He had deliberately humiliated her.

"I know that it isn't legal tender," she flashed, "but I thought you would accept it from me."

"Why from you?" he taunted her.

She shoved the books into her bag and sprang to her feet. She gave him a look that was blazing with indignation.

"I'll be back in ten minutes. You wait for me, and have the room clear."

She was back in less time than she had specified. As she flew through the outer office, she noticed fleetingly that a man was talking to Gracia Ward, but she didn't look at his face, Later she found that it was Jonathan Hydackett, a keen observer and faithful reporter, who made the most of all his notations.

Wylie was alone. It crossed her mind that he had been afraid to anger her further; but the moment she caught his expression, she knew that he had been in no mood to see anyone. He had been pacing up and down the room, but he wheeled with a jerk as she closed the door behind her. He had worked himself into a mastering rage.

She walked rapidly across the room and placed on his desk a little stack of bills and a few pieces of silver.

"Count it, please," she said crisply. "And give me a receipt."

He came to the other side of the desk and stood behind his own chair—tall, very straight, looking at her with a cold anger in his eyes that chilled them to a steel gray.

"I can hardly take this gift from you."

"It isn't a gift. I am paying Clif's mortgage."

"Are you? I think not. You can't pay it."

"I can't? Why can't I?"

"Have you a power of attorney from Clif?"

"No, but——"

"Are you a relative or a member of his family—his wife, his mother—— Or have you an interest in the property?"

"What do you mean?" she panted.

"Otherwise," he went on contemptuously, "your legal status is that of volunteer or intermeddler, and——"

"But, Wylie, you let me draw this money."

"I didn't advise you to," he broke in sharply. "You remember you didn't come here to ask my advice; you came to dictate, a province which presupposes full knowledge of possibilities. But if you had read Jones on Mortgage, or even Tiffany——" He waved his hand toward a bookcase behind him—"or the Encyclopedia of Law and——"

Heather's eyes were wide with wrath and incredulity. "Do you mean, Wylie Chamberlain, that when I offer you legal tender to the full amount of Clif's mortgage with interest—do you mean that I can't discharge it?"

"Just that."

"Why not?"

"Law," he thundered. "No court would recognize such a tender."

"No court where?"

"In Vermont. What state did you think we were in?"

"The state of chaos, I believe," she returned bitterly. She looked down at the money; then back at Wylie. "It isn't possible. Surely you can take this money—and give me a receipt——"

"Surely I could," he snapped out, "but it wouldn't affect Clif's mortgage in the least."

She stood staring at him, baffled, her mind darting quickly this way and that for the solution which she felt must exist. The blood had come up into her cheeks; they burned with suppressed rage.

"There must be some way. You're putting me off with phrases."

His frigid gaze did not waver. "I am not. You're asking something that is not within the possibilities of Vermont law."

"Then tell me what is within those possibilities," she commanded. "Surely no state can deny one citizen the privilege of helping another. Can't you accept this money as security—declare the mortgage satisfied——"

"I have told you——"

"Wait!" She lifted a quick finger. "Declare the mortgage satisfied," she repeated; "then take a new note from Clif—— Why, surely you could do that, and hold this money as collateral."

A portentous red feather whipped across his lean cheeks.

"Couldn't you?" she insisted.

"Is it your idea of honor," he countered, "to ask me to manipulate the law?"

"Yes," she rejoined firmly. "When it is a question of equity, that is my idea of honor. In a free country a friend is entitled to some rights, no matter what your musty old hypotheses in your musty old books say about it. I told you that I came to ask a favor."

For a full minute they measured glance with glance, in a silence so deep that it throbbed about them with the transferred tensity of their own emotions.

"You love that man!" he shot out unexpectedly.

Heather shrank back as if he had struck her. The high color dropped out of her cheeks, leaving her giddy in the reaction. Not once had she paused to think what the persistency of her purpose would signify to Wylie. Even the look of jealousy that she had caught in his face had not warned her how far his thoughts might carry him, because a man's jealousy is often like a flare of red fire—spectacular but not running deep. She had understood then that he was jealous of her friendship for Clif, but not that he was reading into her action any stronger feeling.

How could he? It was to her monstrous that he should allow himself to misconstrue her motive. After all, one side of her ancestry reached far back into Puritanism, which repudiated emotion and particularly the expression of emotion; and Wylie's bald words had set into vibration some chord that rarely stirred. She was profoundly shocked. If pride had not stiffened her lips, she would have flouted the charge indignantly.

"Why don't you deny it?" he threw at her with greater violence. "By God, you do love him!"

She swayed visibly. She put one hand flat on the

desk to steady herself. For a moment the room whirled before her; the windows wavered grotesquely; the books danced in their cases. What had she done? It seemed as if she had uprooted all the facts in her life; they whirled unrelated in her brain as these physical objects whirled before her disturbed vision. Not until things came to rest did she trust herself to speak.

"So long as I wear your ring, that is an insult," she brought out with quivering lips.

At the sound of her own voice, her thoughts cleared. Wylie considered Clif a personal enemy. He intended to block her efforts merely because she came as Clif's friend. She threw back her head with a commanding dignity that was like her mother's.

"I have to ask you again. Will you accept my money as collateral?"

"I shall do no juggling," he retorted, furious. "I have respect for the law, and I shall allow it to follow its course."

"The eminent men in your profession," she reminded him, "have won their eminence by working out legal ways to manipulate legal formalities in the interests of right. That's what makes them eminent; it's what ought to make them eminent; and it's their solutions that lead to the making of more just laws. I'm asking a favor, yes; but it's a perfectly honorable favor."

"I shall stay by the law. What is fair for one man is fair for another."

"Do you really mean—— Why, it would be only for a few days. I know it would be only for a few days."

"I shall let the law take its course," he repeated implacably.

She felt his frozen determination not to yield the advantage that he held. With trembling fingers she gathered up the bills and the silver and stuffed them into her bag. She turned; then wheeled back in obvious irresolution.

Suddenly his anger, goaded by his jealousy, burst its bonds. He had conquered, and it left him free to upbraid, to clinch his victory by drastic injunctions.

"If you are through," he began, with elaborate insolence, "I've got a few things to say myself."

She waited.

CHAPTER XXXIX

I HOPE you realize how foolish this whole scene has been." Wylie's voice was uneven, as if his rage were pushing it about. "So far from doing any good, it has only been unpleasant for both of us—childish, futile! There is no use pretending that I should ever have any patience with your interference, Heather. You may as well understand, once for all, that my business is my own, that I am trained to manage it, that I am competent to manage it, and that I propose to manage it alone. There are very few things that I won't take from you, but you've stumbled on one of the few.

"Besides, you don't lift yourself in my eyes when you come in here with your silly little sentimentalities that you want to substitute for reasonable rules of business conduct. Why, good Lord, Heather, think of your telling me how to run this office! You'd a good deal better put your thought on your own conduct. You come around preaching to me about what I should do, and at this very minute you've got all Hampton Valley criticizing you."

"Criticizing—me!" Her amazement was so swift and so profound that it swept away all the vital elements in their previous discussion. A momentary crimson swirled into her cheeks.

"Yes. Criticizing you!"

"What for?"

He laughed scornfully. "How did you come to think you were such a paragon that you could do anything you pleased and get away with it? I'd have you know that in all the time since I hung out my shingle in Hampton, I've never given people a chance to criticize me as they're criticizing you right now all over town."

"Wylie," she begged, "what do you mean?"

"I mean," he threw out, with the arrogance of triumph, "I mean that last Thursday you spoke to Lizzie Nelson on the street—not only spoke to her, but stopped and talked with her."

Every particle of color dropped out of Heather's cheeks.

"Didn't you?" he insisted.

"I did," she admitted faintly.

"Didn't you know better?"

She said nothing.

He put it another way. "Hadn't you been told not to speak to her?"

"I had," she admitted again.

He soared visibly, in the completeness of his victory. "Then you knew better. You find fault with me for doing something that is perfectly right and perfectly legal, but last Thursday you yourself did something which you knew you had no right to do, and which was an affront to the whole town. Now you observe, Heather, the difference in the way we have treated each other. I said nothing to you, even when I found that the whole village was talking about you; I should never have mentioned it if you hadn't given me this homily on rectitude."

She was facing him squarely, motionless, her head thrown back. Her face was still deathly white, but there was in it a strange luminosity, as if from the reflection of a fire that burned deep within. Her eyes were fixed on Wylie, but they seemed to be focused on something far beyond him. He might have taken warning from her unnatural quietness, but in his anger he interpreted it as the precursor of contrition.

"You say the village is talking about me." She picked up his words in a low monotone. "What are they saying?"

"Saying! Saying! What do you suppose they're saying? They're criticizing you for doing something that no other decent woman in Hampton Valley would have done."

Her chest rose convulsively, but the attitude of her body did not change. Her voice sank lower still, but it was vibrantly clear with controlled emotion.

"Are they also saying that on the same day I spoke to Mrs. Anna Edgerley—that I even stopped and chatted with her?"

"I don't know. That has nothing——"

"Don't you think," she interrupted him, "that probably they're saying that, too?"

"Heather, don't be foolish. That hasn't anything to do with it. Mrs. Edgerley is a lady."

"Mrs. Edgerley has money," corrected Heather. "She also has culture and a charming personality. But I understood this was a question of morality. Isn't it?"

"Certainly, but——"

"Then certainly," Heather broke in evenly, "if they

criticize me for speaking to one, they should criticize me for speaking to the other."

"Let me tell you, Heather," and his voice shook with renewed fury, "you can't drag any of your Greenwich Village latitude into Hampton Valley and get away with it. If you're going to have any standing here, you've got to do what the other decent women do."

"Then I understand, Wylie, that you would hold me to the standards that Hampton Valley has fixed?"

"While you live here, yes. You can't jeopardize your standing by trying to be independent. You said that you were willing to live in Hampton Valley for a while; and if you're going to live here comfortably and have any position, you must conform to the moral standards that Hampton Valley has determined upon."

With her eyes still on his face, she drew off the splendid ring from her finger. Then she leaned over the desk and laid the ring down on the sheet of paper in front of Wylie's chair.

"I could live in Hampton Valley," she said simply, "but I can't live under it."

"Heather!"

On the instant, all his rage dropped away. His face relaxed; his eyes were frightened, tender, and pleading at the same time. Like many people who are rarely stirred to anger, he had lost his control and his perspective, under the double attack upon his jealousy and his professional pride. He had intended to conquer Heather, to show her that she must not infringe upon his prerogatives, to coerce her into the docility that he admired. But the last thing he had intended to do was to lose her. Properly disciplined, she was exactly the woman he wanted.

"Heather, take it back," he begged. "I was a brute. I had no right to say all those things, but you got me on the raw and I didn't realize what I was saying. You know I didn't mean those things. Darling, you know I love you. You'll have to forgive my temper till I learn to control it."

He came around the desk, humble, conciliating.

"Heather, you know I love you—that I want you."

She waved him back. "Perhaps you think so," she said gently. She was no longer angry, either—not even resentful. With the taking off of the ring, she seemed to have severed herself from this agitating entanglement. She felt detached; she spoke as one does who stands outside.

"We have done each other a terrible injustice, Wylie. On cold and selfish reasoning alone, we decided to marry each other. I didn't realize it before, but I see it now. I wanted to get away, to have what I thought would be a wider existence, to be surrounded by the exquisite objects and the exquisite distractions that I thought were the exponents of culture, and you—you had the same hollow ambition and you wanted somebody to manage a social life that would contribute to your professional popularity."

A faint smile crossed her pale lips. "That was a cold basis, Wylie. There wasn't love enough about it to fill in the spaces of the first difference of opinion that came up, to tide us over till we could compromise and adjust. You and I have learned things about each other to-day that many people have to marry to find out."

"Heather, dearest," he implored, "you're taking this too seriously. It was all my fault. I take every bit

of blame. In all humility I ask your forgiveness. I'm ashamed, but I throw myself on your generosity. And I do love you. I swear——"

With a quick gesture he reached toward the ring; then stopped as he caught her instinctive shrinking. His hand dropped. Bewildered, he looked toward her, seeking the clue for an argument that would move her; then his gaze followed hers to the ring he had given her. The sunshine played through the stone, refracting a spray of prismatic colors on the white paper—gay, beautiful colors, as alluring as a mirage, a promise never to be fulfilled.

"You don't seem to understand," she said, with a fleeting wonder. "If we were to go on, we should do this same thing again and again. I couldn't marry a man that I was ashamed of, and I'm ashamed of you from the depths of my being. You're using an honorable profession as a cloak for some of the most dishonorable transactions that men are capable of. You know that in Hampton Valley the lending of money isn't the legitimate business that it may be in the city—where there is plenty of money in circulation and plenty of chances to recoup. Here it is the beginning of the end.

"When a man comes to you for a loan, you know who he is, you know his circumstances and his capacities, you can predict with a fair degree of accuracy whether he will ever be able to pay you or not; and you deliberately use that personal knowledge. You soothe him along; you bide your time; and then you pounce on him and take not merely the amount of the money he owes you and the interest he agreed to pay,

but whatever property he has. That's what you hope to do from the beginning.

"Here I've just offered you the money you lent Clif Stanleigh and the interest on it, and would you take it? No! And what is the reason? It's because you want the farm, and evidently the laws of this state give you the whiphand. If it's true that they do, they are a disgrace to the very intention of law. Anyhow, you use your training and your intellect to take advantage of people who are unfortunate or who haven't your grasp and skill in forecasting. You plan combinations of farms; you make sales by your diplomatic approach to possible buyers; you follow the wounded to their lair and you suck their blood."

"Heather Davenway!"

"You may as well know how it looks to me," she went on quietly. "You aren't the first man who has built up a fortune here out of the wreckage of human lives; you aren't the first man to lend a sum of money with one hand and take a note for a larger sum with the other; you aren't the first to antedate a note; you aren't the first to accomplish a clever usury inside the law, to outstrip Shylock in essential cruelty—but, heaven help me, I didn't know you were doing it when I said I'd marry you.

"Wait a minute," she commanded, when Wylie would have spoken. "All this means is that I'm the wrong woman, Wylie. It won't be hard for you to find a wife who will never question your methods but will keep her eyes only on the income. And it won't be hard ——" Her voice rose on a sudden intensity. "It won't be hard for you to find a wife who will conduct

herself in Hampton Valley—as all the decent Hampton women—have decided she should."

In the moment of breathless stupefaction before he could find the most effective defence, she turned with a dignity that he had never previously roused in her, and went out of the room. She heard him speaking as she closed the door, but she did not turn back. She went through the outer office, bowing to Lem Tripe because he stood in her way, and not because she saw him with any conscious recognition.

At the top of the stairs in the hall she paused, leaning dizzily against the smudged wall, which she would ordinarily have avoided with fastidious distaste. Through her bewilderment and consternation over the chaotic developments of the past hour, only one thing was clear—that she had broken a tie that had to be broken, that no future regrets would rise up to cloud the conviction that her action had been inevitable.

But she was beaten in the purpose that had sent her here. The velvet bag, bulging gently with bills, reminded her that Wylie had conquered on the business point and that as far as Clif was concerned, she had merely increased the enmity toward him.

She shivered as if from cold. Looking down the narrow stairway, she shrank before the ordeal of going through the streets of Hampton, of meeting vigilant eyes. Stringing the bag on her arm, she put her hands up to her cheeks. Her face was almost as cold as her hands. She must bring back the color, or Hampton would know. Still leaning against the wall, she pinched her cheeks till she felt the unwilling blood under her fingers. Then she nerved herself and went

down the stairs to the sidewalk, her head very high and a ghastly smile fastened on her lips.

When she came to the wide window of the Hampton National Bank, she stopped. . . . Kitty Judevine's father was president of the bank. Heather knew him very well. . . . He was a friend. He knew everything in town, and he was discreet.

Without going further in her thoughts, she started up the granite steps of the bank and went in. Mr. Judevine was in his office, and he happened to be at liberty. He was an impressive man with gray hair and an air of reserve which kept many people at a distance, but Heather always felt so entirely at ease with him that she could go straight to her point now with stark frankness.

"Mr. Judevine, you know about Clif Stanleigh—that he's going to lose his home?"

He smiled kindly at this tense young person. "I know that he may," he corrected gently. "But then he may not. There's a chance that Ward may help him in time, and there's a chance that Clif may be able to help himself. He's got four or five days yet."

Her gaze sharpened. "How did you know the exact time?"

"Because—between us, Heather—the bank is empowered to act for him if a remittance comes."

She recalled the drawn shades and she caught the implication that Clif was out of town, but she slipped past those details. She was busy with another thought.

"Of course Clif has an account here?"

"Oh, yes, and——"

"And you mean that if money came in from anywhere—anywhere——" She waved her hand in a wide

gesture. "Why, anybody could come in and deposit to Clif's account. Couldn't he? Anybody!"

His smile was checked by her tragic earnestness. "Yes," he said gravely. "Anybody could do that—anybody."

"Thank you," she said hurriedly. And went out.

Five minutes later she came back to the door.

"Mr. Judevine," she called softly, "there's money enough now—in Clif's account."

CHAPTER XL

THE drawn shades in Clif Stanleigh's store had had all the effect of an active event. Lem Tripe, coming down town to open his barber shop, had delayed his business day while he waited seven minutes for Jeff Cooper, who was later than usual about unlocking his drug store to Hampton patronage.

"I gol, Jeff," said Lem, "j'notice—Clif's shut up?"

"Sign on the door," agreed Jeff, turning the key and shaking his own door with mighty shakes. It was sticking badly, but Jeff believed that pushing was a trifle easier than planing.

"Whatja reckon happened, Jeff?" insisted Lem. "Clif fail or somep'n?"

"Looks like it. I knew it was coming."

"Ye-uh." Lem nodded his head in pleasurable despondency. "He's been a goner for quite a spell. Vision'ry family!"

Ratty Dingwall stalked hurriedly across the street, waving a long, lank arm as a signal for these friends to wait till he could join them.

"Well, by durn!" he puffed. "Clif's got it in the neck, has he? Heard anything?"

"Don't need to," responded Jeff cryptically. "Stock he carried! He's had his head mooning in the clouds and thought Hampton didn't know good goods from bad. Why, look at me! If I didn't carry an up-to-

date line, you'd find a little sign on my door, too."

"Ye-uh," coincided Ratty. "Same here! Now you take me! Ain't a niftier line o' notions in Spinooski County than I got. If you're goin' to run a business, you gotta run it right."

"Ye-uh. Oh, sure!" subscribed Lem heartily. "Run it right and work hard!"

"You betcha!" corroborated Mr. Dingwall.

For several minutes the three gentlemen remained in close conclave over Clif's affairs, pooling their testimony that the secret of success lay in hard work and intelligent application.

During the next two days innumerable conferences had been held on Railroad Street and lower Main, but they were based chiefly upon speculation. The general opinion was that Clif was close to bankruptcy. The sheriff was given ample opportunity to disclose any forewarnings that might have come his way, but he covered his total ignorance with a lofty reticence—unsatisfactory and at the same time a stimulus to suspicion. Clif and his clerk, Tom Davis, were seen to go in and out of the store, but when intercepted they were less than communicative. They were walled about with a reserve that not even skillful Hampton could penetrate.

Discussion on Bean Brothers's bench had received a tremendous impetus from this reserve. These last warm days in October were precious ones to the cositters, who would soon be obliged to hold their sessions around the rusty stove inside Bean Brothers's Grocery.

"'N other feller gone to smash!" commented Mr. Ezra Sykes, night watchman at the foundry, jerking an eloquent thumb over his shoulder in the general

direction of the Stanleigh store. "I tell you, gentlemun, a feller's gotta have push. The times is bustlin'; and any feller that wants to keep his head above water, he's gotta hustle and bustle with 'em."

Mr. Jonas Dake, the blacksmith, removed his pipe, contemplated the bowl with a gloomy eye, and nodded his bullet head lugubriously. "Ye-uh, Ezry, you said it that time. I can 'member when a feller didn't have to hustle way he does now, but, I gorry, the world's a-whirlin' faster and faster. Times ain't what they was once; I snum, they sure ain't."

"You betcha they ain't." Ezra took up this sentiment explosively. "Nowadays a feller's gotta look sharp or somebody'll get his eyeteeth away from him."

"Same time," drawled Selah Flinker, the town "dickerer," who shocked Hampton by continually wanting to move from one house to another, "same time I'm sorry for Clif. Guess he didn't have it in him, but you unnerstand——"

"Oh, we unnerstand," interrupted Ezra jealously. "Too bad, all right, but it'll work out. Mark my words, it'll work out. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good."

"And furthermore," contributed Mr. Dake, "every dog has his day."

"Ye-uh, that's it exactly, Jone," encouraged Mr. Sykes, slapping a denim knee in earnest corroboration. "Every dog has his day—and then it's some other dog. There's more to this than we've hearn yet. Clif's close-mouthed, and he ain't sayin' all he could, but it'll come out. Mark my words, it'll come out. Still water runs deep. And I tell you, gentlemun, you never can tell how far a frog can jump by the way he looks."

Mr. Dake, momentarily overcome by the powerful truth in his friend's remark, presently rallied and threw a random contribution into the symposium.

"Ain't none so blind as them that won't see."

The thinkers pulled at their pipes during a moment of silence, while they digested the heavy material which their mental picnic had yielded.

Mr. Dake was the first to resume conversation. "Sam Hillock—say, I seen Sam 's mornin'."

"Didja?" prompted Selah Flinker, hoping much.

" 'S'mornin'," repeated Mr. Dake. "Sam said he'd had a card from Lote Joselyn—dated Boston."

Mr. Sykes straightened alertly. "What kind of a honeymoon's Lote a-havin'?"

"Slick, Ezry. Sam says he'd be 'shamed to be as happy on a post card as Lote was. They're a-stoppin' to a swell hotel, but they ain't goin' to be gone but a week."

Mr. Sykes fortified himself with a long draw at his pipe. "Queer old coot! I could tell you somep'n I bet you don't know. 'Tain't gen'rally known. But jest between us, Culy she played an awful joke on Lote."

"How's that? Go on, Ezra," urged the bench with tingling eagerness.

"Well, you know everybody's thought as how Culy was plumb desp'rate. But if you'll b'lieve it, gentlemun, after Lote was ready to buy her a ring and to tell everybody how lucky he was to get her and all that dope 'bout bein' so favored, why then Culy she up and balked 'bout marryin' him."

"No!" breathed the bench. "You don't say, Ezry!"

"I do say," triumphed Mr. Sykes. "Infumation happened to come my way. Seems Culy never'd thought a thing 'bout her house—how she'd have to give it up and go to live at Lote's. 'Course that old Lym Leathers place has been in the fam'ly for generations, and Culy she thinks a lot of her fam'ly, so when it come to a show-down, she said she wouldn't leave. She said her ancestors had stayed by her and she was goin' to stay by her ancestors. She was for passin' up the hull idee of matrymony. Lote he near threw a fit."

"Gosh, Ezry!" murmured the bench. "Ain't goin' to stop there, be you?"

"Jest for 'nother breath," explained Mr. Sykes facetiously. "They thrashed it out for a coupla days, and finally Lote he promised to fix up the place so it'd be a credit, and they're goin' to rent it."

"By gol!" commented the astounded Mr. Dake. "Seems kinda wild, don't it, to hold on to a house you don't live in? Lote, I guess he was hard hit, all right. Still, mebbe they'll get as much as eight or nine dollars a month."

Mr. Sykes lifted a bony hand and dropped it in a gesture of high disdain. "Lote's fair made a spectacle of himself, makin' sech a fuss over Culy—as if he hadn't but jest found out she lived here. Me, what I says is: Ain't no use losin' your spine jest 'cause you decide to go and get married."

Mr. Sykes's thoughts were deflected by a large load of coal that was passing at the moment. "Gee-rusalem, I don't know what Hampton's comin' to—sendin' good money outa town, buyin' things 'at's raised in other places. Why, look at all our mount'ns covered with wood! What I say is: Every citizen

oughter burn wood, 'stead of sendin' away for coal."

"Coal, it gives a more stiddy heat." Mr. Flinker felt that this fragment of justice should be done to the fuel from other sections.

"And you can bank down a coal furnace at night," offered Mr. Dake, "and the fire, it don't go out on you all winter. There's that much, but——"

"That ain't the point 't all," snapped Mr. Sykes. "Point is, we raise wood, and we'd oughter keep our money to home. 'Tain't boostin' Hampton to send money outa town for coal. 'Tain't our business to fatten up the coal kings and fatten up the coal miners on good Hampton money. What I say is: Spend your money in Hampton! Boost your own town!"

"Ye-uh, Ezry. Oh, o' course we'd oughter." Confronted by the slogan, the bench was quick to give its support to the wide principles of loyalty and civic prosperity.

For two days and the greater part of two nights Clif Stanleigh and his clerk had worked industriously behind the drawn shades, packing small articles of stock into large boxes, tying garments into bundles, dumping miscellanies into clothes baskets. It was the beginning of a desperate move.

For months Clif had been contemplating the closing out of his store. Now that Ward was on the road to success, it would be only a short time till he could help Mason through college, and this would relieve Clif of the responsibility of both brothers. He was therefore comparatively free to take a chance, and he had decided to take that chance as a possible means of redeeming the farm. He had little hope that Ward would be able to help him there; in fact, he had with-

held details, so that Ward knew only in a large way that the period of redemption would expire sometime before the New Year. He had felt that Ward must not be worried at this critical time in his career.

Curbing his pride, Clif had gone to Wylie Chamberlain and asked the privilege of giving a thirty-day note, with a quit-claim deed in escrow to be delivered upon default in payment of the note. But Wylie had absolutely refused any quarter.

The train that took Henry Nye out of town, brought Clif a letter from a merchant in the next county with whom he had been in correspondence. The merchant said in this letter that he was willing to combine with Clif as the latter had suggested. He would give over part of his store to the best of Clif's stock, and for an agreed commission would coöperate with him in a tremendous sale for the rural trade. The driving points in the advertising were to be the sacrifice prices on what was practically a bankrupt stock, and the fact that the stock came from a distance.

Clif determined to go. A quick sale might enable him, even yet, to redeem the farm. He empowered the bank to act for him in case he could get a remittance back. Then he telephoned to Loopville for a van larger than Hampton afforded.

When Clif and his clerk and his stock were seen to leave the Valley by means of the Loopville van, the speculation about his affairs was given a new turn, but the most cheerful opinion seemed to be that Clifton Stanleigh was sneaking away on some visionary impulse.

He had been gone almost two days when Heather

Davenway went to Wylie in his behalf, but it was not until she reached home again that she knew where he had gone. Mrs. Davenway had been in his confidence from the first, but she had not mentioned Clif since Heather had opposed her helping him.

When the girl walked into the sitting-room Mrs. Davenway knew at once that something portentous had happened. Compassion leaped into her expression, but she said nothing.

"Where is Clif, mother?" Heather's voice was strained and unconsciously imperative.

Mrs. Davenway told her.

"I want you to telegraph him," Heather went on. "Tell him—in your name—that the mortgage has been paid. Will you?"

Mrs. Davenway held her amazement in check. "Yes, certainly," she said quietly. Her fine eyes dropped from Heather's face to her ungloved hand, on which the splendid ring no longer sparkled, and she knew the price that the girl had paid.

She rose softly and took Heather into her arms. At the touch of this wordless love, Heather's tension broke, and with it the constraint of the last few days. She buried her head on her mother's breast, just as she had three months before when she had come back to a crisis that now seemed to her insignificant compared with the one which she had worked up for herself.

"Mother," she said brokenly, "you—you are a darling."

CHAPTER XLI

IN that moment of communion Heather and her mother had swung back to their former deep understanding, but it was days before they took up any of the details that raced painfully again and again through Heather's mind. With unspoken wonder she felt the relief that underlay Mrs. Davenway's tenderness. Her mother was glad! She had never been wholly pleased with the engagement. How long had she foreseen the essential inharmony to which her daughter had pledged herself?

"Is it possible," Heather meditated, "that she sees further ahead and deeper down than I can?"

It was a disconcerting thought, because if it were true, wherein lay this advantage that she had felt her training and widened experience had given her? She had come home convinced that she had lifted herself out of the narrowness of her heredity into a sounder judgment and a sharpened perspicacity, which would guide her in all vital matters. Well, this had certainly been a vital matter, and yet it was only after plunging and miserably vacillating that she had come out into a decision which represented her real self, whereas her mother, who had had none of this training, none of these wider experiences—her mother had seen from the very first. . . .

Something of this puzzle came to Heather's lips one afternoon, as she helped with the week's mending.

"How," she broke out, "how could I have been so mistaken in myself?"

Mrs. Davenway's troubled eyes held hers for a moment in yearning affection. "Dearest child, it's your impulsiveness."

Heather was astounded. She caught her breath as under a dash of cold water. "Impulsiveness!" she gasped out. "Do you think I'm impulsive? I?"

"I think," said Mrs. Davenway slowly, "that you have the most impulsive nature I have ever known. It frightens me sometimes, darling. I'm so afraid—I have been so afraid that you might rush into some terrible mistake, because you don't stop long enough to think."

Heather's hands dropped on her work. She sat staring at her mother in the deepest stupefaction.

Mrs. Davenway went on sadly. "Thing that makes me feel worst is, you got it from me. The Davenways were always slow to act, but I—I used to be terribly impulsive when I was a girl, although not half so much so as you are, dear. I presume that it's hard for you to realize it in me, because I've conquered a great deal of it."

Heather continued to stare, her breath coming quickly. Surely this was a reversal of their real attributes. All summer she had been silently criticizing her mother for acting on naïve and unconsidered impulses and had been self-assured that every action of her own had been sanctioned by rationality. And yet her mother believed——

"I don't see how you can think I'm impulsive,

mother," she expostulated at length. "It's true that I made an awful blunder, but really it was because I didn't know all the facts. Why, I do reason things out. That's what I've trained myself to do. I make it a rule never to act until I feel sure—dead sure."

Mrs. Davenway smiled and shook her head. "My dear, don't you know that sureness is a feeling, and not a mental process? People who think are rarely sure, but impulsive people are always sure—at the time. They act on the moment's conviction, and they can't wait to test out their emotion by the reflection that might save them."

"Oh mother, you can't be right about me. I'd hate to think I was impulsive—it's so disorganized! It's strange that I've given you that impression, but you don't realize how much I think things over. Why, I couldn't possibly be impulsive without knowing it myself."

"Dear Heather, people don't generally recognize it unless somebody tells them. It's the most deceptive quality there is. Your feelings sweep you along with such a rush that you're positive your brain must have set them in motion. But don't look so miserable over it. If you only realize where your danger is, you'll be able to conquer it in the course of time."

Heather made no further defence, but these things stayed in her mind and frequently recurred in the days that followed.

She dreaded now to meet the townspeople. She felt sensitive about the inevitable discussion of her concerns, the more sensitive because she was blaming herself severely. She could not yet see how it had all happened. Certainly she had not really been in love, else

she would not now feel so free, so relieved, so thankful.

Undoubtedly she had been led away by aspirations that she had not recognized as motives. In these last few years of contact with city luxury and culture and opportunities, she had developed a longing to have them for herself. Wylie Chamberlain had been the concrete promise of those things, and she had sincerely liked him. But it was monstrous that they should have formed a calculating partnership for the pursuit of surroundings and ambitions, and that they should have used a thin congeniality as the sanctification of what now proved to have been their purpose. She shriveled with self-hatred that she could have unwittingly answered the hollow bells of ambition without regard to the path she would tread to reach them.

She recalled the various citizens whom she had encountered in Wylie's office and in the bank, and she knew that their sharp eyes and practiced speculation must have been busy with her—as indeed they had been. She felt, too, that the sympathy of the town would be with Wylie. Hampton admired him, was proud of his prosperity, proud that he had brought his intellect and his training back to the Valley, and never for a moment reflected that he was using his abilities to wrest as many selfish advantages as possible out of the township. In his mind he patronized the town, but Hampton did not know it. He was squeezing a small fortune out of the more needy citizens, but Hampton approved and exalted him as clever. Naturally no one would have any patience with a girl who did not appreciate the high honor of being chosen by the most eligible young man in Hampton.

"He wasn't half good enough for you," cried Kitty

Judevine, kissing Heather as if she had come back from the borders of danger. She had previously been equally outspoken in her approval, but it was clear that what Kitty had meant on both occasions was that she loved her friend and wanted her to be happy. Heather was grateful to have this devotion in Hampton.

But there were others who expressed themselves more freely.

Mrs. Giddings reached down from her pinnacle of affluence and pointed out the girl's real status. "Beggars shouldn't be choosers, Heather. Looks like you had a chance to do almost as well as my Daphy, if you'd only had the flawless sense to hold to it. I feel for your mother."

"Well, Heth!" Mrs. Lem Tripe stopped her on the street for this exclamation in a high, nervous voice. "I can't make out what you're thinkin' of. Trouble with cities is, they make you so stuck-up that you can't see which side your bread's buttered on."

The bread-and-butter epitome proved to be very popular in registering the sentiment of Hampton Valley. There were plenty of people, like Mrs. Weatherwax and the Bigelows and the Elliots, who said nothing—merely treated Heather with a reticent commiseration and hoped gently that she would remain in Hampton, anyhow. But there was a considerable social stratum that always preëmpted the privilege of speaking out.

From this stratum Heather gathered explicitly that she might go farther and do worse; that she'd probably come off from her high horse only to ride to her doom; that money made the mare go; that—still further on the equine plane—it is not wise to look a gift

horse in the mouth; that after this it was more than likely she'd take a leap in the dark; that pretty soon she'd find herself left on the chips; that it would serve her right to die an old maid; that opportunity knocks but once, pointed by the implication that Wylie had done the tapping.

Heather's original desire to break with Hampton Valley forever was now enormously renewed and strengthened. She could not wait until the preliminaries could be consummated which would leave her and her mother entirely free. It seemed a wonderful piece of good fortune that they were at last able to sell the house. The man from Frear's Crossing did come to Hampton, as Mrs. Davenway had heard he might—not to open a new garage, as had been rumored, but to take over one already established. He wanted to buy a home; he liked Mrs. Davenway's; he offered her five thousand dollars. They compromised on fifty-five hundred, Mrs. Davenway to leave the greater part of the furnishings and give possession within a few days.

Heather was delighted. She telegraphed to New York to secure an apartment which one of her friends was soon to give up. The friend was to move into a home of her own in New Jersey sometime in October and she had promised Heather the chance of taking over the lease on the apartment, but she would not have held the privilege open very much longer. How lucky that the time had not expired, and how lucky, Heather thought, that she had not definitely given up the privilege! It had been only a chance negligence apparently, because there had been weeks during which she had not expected to return to New York at all.

Everything seemed to contribute to their swift leave-taking. Booth Ransome had made a remarkable recovery and was eager to get away. He was even using his arms again, although the muscles were still uncertain. One day a young man appeared, summoned by Ransome to drive him away from Hampton, in which he had no further desire to exploit the Comet car.

No one knew where the young man came from; no one knew where Ransome planned to go; no one knew whether his home was in Bellows Falls, as he had said, or in Springfield, which he had often mentioned, or in some other town not disclosed. Mrs. Davenway, watching him ride away in the red car, realized that they knew scarcely more about Booth Ransome now than they had known when he first came into the Valley. He had vastly increased the complications of her life and he had come very near defrauding her out of the real value of her river property. To be sure, he had finally surrendered his advantage; but he had intended something quite different, and those intentions had wrought his own disaster.

In spite of the day-to-day association and his utter dependence for many long, trying weeks, he went as he had come—a stranger. His family, his connections, his aims, were hidden in some reserve deep beneath the turbulences of his unhappy, contradictory nature.

Clif Stanleigh was still out of town—greatly to the amazement of Henry Nye, who had come back expecting to find him in the store, doggedly selling his wares to uncritical patrons. Mr. Nye came out to see Mrs. Davenway, and she told him all the circumstances, but she did not relieve his amazement. Why, he asked savagely, why had Clif not confessed his pre-

dicament to him? Yet instantly he recognized Clif's pride and respected it. But why had not some of the business men of Hampton Valley helped a fellow-merchant during the few days or possibly the few weeks before his brother Ward would have been able to help him? Ward's success, already begun, and the unusual loyalty among the Stanleigh boys, would have safeguarded them from the slightest risk.

He could understand that Clif might not have asked for help, but everybody knew his needs; everybody knew, or should have known, that the emergency would be a short one. Why, then, had not somebody offered? The answer was only too plain. Hampton had fallen into the habit of considering Clif an under-dog, and it would have been contrary to village tenets to change this habit. An overwhelming amount of counter-evidence might sweep away a habit now and then, but the citizens were usually guiltless of initiative in this matter of change. The Valley never had helped Clif; it could not be expected to help him now. That was Hampton's brief and simple philosophy.

This defection of the town stirred Henry Nye to a determination that was fierce and yet firm. Bound by no ties and no responsibilities, he was in a psychological mood to follow whatever lead appealed most strongly to his sympathy and his sense of justice, which were vastly augmented by the personal attraction that Clif Stanleigh had for him. At last he had found an interest, and that interest was to help a man who had ability and loyalty and ambition, but whose home town did not believe in him.

He could talk freely with Mrs. Davenway, because of her devotion to Clif. Also, he talked frequently.

Every day he came for a chat. Heather heard the hum of voices in the sitting-room, and the occasional sallies of laughter. Mr. Nye seemed to have a great many questions to ask.

Heather wondered why he came so often.

CHAPTER XLII

WHILE the Davenways were tearing their house to pieces, cleaning it with New England thoroughness, sorting their possessions and packing part of them, they were—as far as external appearance went—entirely in line with the general activity of the village. In every house that respected tradition and village routine, a mighty disturbance was taking place.

During these last warm days all Hampton was getting ready for winter—just as, in the spring, all Hampton got ready for summer. The two seasons, being diametrically opposed, called for highly specialized preparations. Now, in October, plans were centered on the forthcoming hibernation. The men were raking leaves, burning part of them, using part to bank the houses with; they were having coal put into the cellars; they were getting the storm windows out from their seclusion in the attic; they were pulling the dead vegetable tops in the garden and burning them.

The women were cleaning house and comparing notes about their progress and about their respective supplies of canned fruit and vegetables, pickles and relishes, set away for winter on the swing-shelf or in the special preserve cupboard in the cellar. Mrs. Si Hoyt told Mrs. Arad Plummer that she'd got down to the first floor in her cleaning, whereupon Mrs. Plum-

mer, being two bedrooms behind this record, hurried home to redouble her energy with broom and mop-pail. Mrs. Lem Tripe informed Mrs. Bill Capron that she had run all her spare linen through the wash waters and had it "a-bleachin' on the grass," whereupon Mrs. Capron was reminded sharply: "I'd oughter do the same thing, or my linen will yeller on me, what with lyin' and all." It was a time of domestic intensity, but enlivened by a similarity of effort and by constant comparison of interesting details.

The Davenways had bought their house furnished, but had added a good many articles from their previous housekeeping in smaller quarters. These were the things to which Mrs. Davenway was attached and which she found it difficult to leave. A "patent-rocker" was to go to Grandma Davenway, who had always admired it—admired, too, its crocheted tidy showing a deer cropping tender leafage from a young tree. Two pieces were crated to send to New York: a mahogany highboy and a bird's-eye maple chest. Everything else was to be left, aside from the most personal belongings.

Except when Fanny Waters came in to help with the cleaning Heather and her mother were entirely alone now. It came over Heather with a shock that this was the very consummation to which she had looked forward when she returned to Hampton; but now that it had come, it was not at all what she had pictured. She had fancied that after the first adjustment to the plan, they would prepare for the new life with zest and happy eagerness. But instead, they stole about the house quietly, talking less than usual, sorting and

destroying and packing with emotions deeply felt but not expressed.

Mrs. Davenway was as affectionately thoughtful as ever; her loving smile was as ready; but Heather knew that her heart was torn by the misery of leaving her home and her friends. She was invited here and there for farewell afternoons; and Heather, watching her come up the path on her return, looking very handsome in the smoky gray gown with the touches of dull gold, was struck by the deepened sadness in her face after each of these gatherings.

Neighbors and friends dropped in with increasing frequency, and nearly always they brought some offering of food, although not one of them could compete with Mrs. Davenway as a cook. And they all knew it. But it had nothing to do with the present exigency. These quadrants of cake and servings of pudding were not intended as exponents of skill or even as nourishment; they were the conveyers of spiritual messages that stirred deep beneath the inherited phlegmatism of these women but were strangled before they could reach the lips.

Mrs. Cooper, bearing a rich section of butternut cake with maple-sugar frosting, came in quietly and sat for a few minutes looking at Mrs. Davenway in unwonted silence.

"I'll miss you," she said in a flat voice. "You'll send a card now and then—won't you? Good land! I'll miss you."

There were no kisses, no effusive bemoanings, but it seemed to Heather that the air echoed continually with these phrases, delivered in a colorless tone but with

tongue-tied significance: "I'll miss you. Good land! I'll miss you."

Mrs. Styggles brought floating island; Mrs. Judevine, a silk kimono; Mrs. Gilman offered chow-chow; Tillie Spinkett outdid herself on suet pudding. Even Mrs. Pickering had no news to recount—brought, rather, a glass of jelly and would not sit down because she knew it would be an interruption. She stood awkwardly by the door, her small head held too far forward from her wide, gaunt shoulders, her bony hands moving nervously.

"It's rosb'ry, Eleanor," she explained about the jelly. "I thought mebbe you'd take it—along with you. Might make you think of home—kinda."

"Thank you, Minty," said Mrs. Davenway, with trembling lips. "That was thoughtful of you."

"I can't b'lieve it—that you're goin'," Mrs. Pickering broke out helplessly, looking at her friend with sad eyes. "You'n me have been neighbors for a good while, Eleanor. Seems like—I'll miss you—kinda."

"You've been a good neighbor, Minty," supplemented Mrs. Davenway, realizing it as she never had before—because, with all her faults, Minty had a loyal dependability in times of need.

"Well, let me hear from you," Minty enjoined in a lifeless voice. "I'll miss you—neighbors, way we been."

She went through the screen door, but on the steps she turned. "I can't b'lieve it—hardly. 'Course I'll see you—I'll run in." And as she went down the path, it was with none of her old prancing energy, but jerkily, almost heavily.

Mrs. Davenway spent more and more time in the

kitchen. She spent hours in the pantry, going over her cooking utensils and making different decisions about how many she could take. She fell into melancholy thought before her capacious wood-and-coal range. Heather had told her she would have a gas range in New York. How strange that would seem! And how difficult! And how did one get used to this thing that they called a kitchenette? She was accustomed to space and every imaginable utensil. Home-keeping had been her life, and cooking had been its center. How did one learn to stand still and reach this thing and that by twisting one's waist instead of walking, to keep one's spice-boxes packed like sardines, to touch the stove with one hand and the refrigerator with the other, to fling the scraps into a pail in the wall?

The more details she learned about the Wider Life, the more bewildered and heartsick she felt.

Heather found her in the pantry one afternoon, standing in front of the molding-board, her hands outflung on each side of a heavy yellow mixing-bowl, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the window that looked out into the garden. The sound of Heather's entrance failed to penetrate her abstraction. She did not move.

"Oh mother!" Heather said softly. "Mother!"

Mrs. Davenway turned then; and the tears that had filled her eyes, brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks. But she smiled.

"I guess it's too heavy—to take," she said simply.

"Oh mother, we could—could take it somehow."

Mrs. Davenway choked. She shook her head, smiling through the rain of tears that she was powerless to check. "I've mixed everything in it—always—that's all. But it's too heavy to take."

Then Heather, instead of comforting, broke down and had to be comforted. She wept in her mother's arms. And Mrs. Davenway soothed her and told her it was only the break that was hard, and that they would surely be happy as soon as they were settled.

They had an early supper, and then Heather went out to the barn. Cula and Zelotes had returned, and they had promised that Spark should have a stall in the Joselyn barn and be tenderly cared for. Heather had spent long hours with Spark in the last few days and had deferred parting with him as long as she felt that she could. She knew the time had come when she must give him up. She saddled him and rode him slowly out of the yard. They would have one last ride together, and on her return she would leave him with Cula.

A little earlier that same afternoon Clif Stanleigh had come back to Hampton on the auto-stage. Tired and dusty, he swung off at the farm for a bath and a change of clothes; then he came down into the village and went straight to the post office. In his box was a letter from Ward. Without opening it, he went back to his forlorn, dismantled store. The few people whom he met greeted him casually and yet with a speculation and sly significance that puzzled him at the time.

In his dingy office he read the letter. It had been waiting for him three days, Clif having cancelled his forwarding order when he had made arrangements for his return. Ward was again in New York, and his play had opened on Broadway. It was drawing good houses, and for the first time Ward was enthusiastic. His prospects were promising there, and he had sold several skits and scenarios. He enclosed a draft for

four thousand dollars with the laconic message: "Pay up that darn' mortgage, old scout. Sell the farm and your stock and your old clothes. Get a new outfit and cut loose. Lord knows you've earned it."

Clif read it the second time; he rustled the draft between his fingers. He had had complete faith in Ward's ultimate justification; but now that the words were under his eye, and the tangible result between his fingers, he felt stunned. Just when he had cleaned up half this amount from this stock, too! They had squirmed and twisted and worried for years, but now——

He looked out through the glass partition into the long, shadowy room with the partially emptied shelves and the litter of pasteboard boxes and excelsior from the hurried packing, and tried to realize that at last he was free—free of responsibility, free of this barter that he had hated, free to take up whatever work he pleased. Ward's letter cemented his freedom. But how ironic that it could not have come a few weeks earlier, so that the Stanleigh boys could have settled their own troubles without friendly intervention!

The bond between Clif's family and Mrs. Davenway had been so strong that he had received word of her assistance more as a tribute of her friendship for his mother than as a personal service, but at the same time he felt it keenly that his mother's sons had not been able to save their mother's home by themselves.

Finally he locked the store and went over to the hotel. He had had several letters from Henry Nye, so he knew that he was back in Hampton. He found him in the hotel office reading the Itemizer with a frank appreciation that should have gratified the town.

"You young rascal!" Henry Nye exclaimed. "Why did you run off just when I wanted you to stay put?"

Clif smiled. "I was burning a few bridges."

"And I suppose you couldn't have burned them in Hampton. Well, it's a good thing to have 'em out of the way. Come in and have some supper with me, and we'll talk."

They went into the dining-room and sat down on opposite sides of a row of accessories beginning with an ironstone sugar bowl and ending with a bottle of catsup. While they ate the really excellent meal, they did indeed talk—and a new world was disclosed to Clifton Stanleigh, vastly different from the world he had known in Hampton Valley.

"It was easier than I expected," Henry Nye said, breaking a baked potato. "As long as you had your patents, I had nothing to do but investigate markets. I went straight to New York; and the minute I struck Ring Brothers, I knew it was a go. Some of the models didn't raise their temperature, but they offered a royalty on six of 'em. What do you think of that? Or they said they'd finance you—back your factory and put you in as manager."

Clif was paralyzed. "Finance—me?" he gasped. "Do you mean that I might have been——"

The older man laughed. "It's night all the time to the woodchuck that stays in his burrow," he said kindly. "All you did, young man, was to take Hampton's word that the sun wasn't out. Well, I didn't stop with one firm. I saw the leading factory representatives—they're all there around Madison and on Broadway—and I found it would be no trick at all to get your models displayed. That marble game takes 'em all;

I knew it would be a winner. If you're going to take that way of beginning, you've got to get busy. The buyers for the retail stores will be on again in February." He buttered a piece of cornbread and looked up quickly. "What's the matter? Isn't your steak good?"

Clif smiled foolishly. "My brain isn't working. I can't get this thing. It's unbelievable."

"It's nothing of the sort. It's just what you should have expected, only you didn't have a good courage motor attached to your ability."

Clif severed a piece of beefsteak and pushed it about with his fork. He had never been so embarrassed before in his life. This opportunity to do the work that he had wanted to do, had come upon him so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that it had routed his power of apprehension. He could not believe it; he could not think, could not talk. He felt as if he were skidding in space.

"I am deeply grateful——" he stammered awkwardly.

"Grateful, nothing! All I've done is to lift your eyelids a trifle. And now get this straight. You've got creativeness and originality, and they give you a darn' sight more independence than you evidently realize. Right now you can say 'Go,' and somebody'll move. You've got two chances open this minute: to take Ring Brothers's backing, or to take mine. You're the autocrat. I don't mind telling you that I hope you'll choose me, but I'm at your mercy."

Clif's steady gray eyes held the older man's gaze for a long, significant moment. "Nothing would suit me better than to be associated with you, Mr. Nye,"

he began; then broke off with a helpless gesture. "But, good heavens, I can't believe it. It seems a bigger risk for one man than for a company. And it doesn't seem possible that my work can be worth such faith. . . . Why, I never knew anybody that had such faith—never!"

"In Hampton, I presume not," laughed Henry Nye. "Mine was made in Kansas. Get that thought of risk out of your head. I expect to make a profit, and I hope you'll make a greater profit because you let me in on this. It's my idea that you put in your originality, which is priceless, and I put in the money, which isn't priceless at all, and that we share equally. Does that suit you? And incidentally you'll be doing me a human service. I'm more interested than I have been before in months. After all, I've done stereotyped things all my life, and I hadn't supposed that I could find anything like this that I could have a finger in and feel I'm helping to do something new.

"Why, there's no end to the different things we can work out. We ought to have a big new leader each year. . . . I got half an idea myself yesterday. Maybe I can train for a satellite. And now we've got to get down to business on the double-quick, so as to have some models ready in February. I understand this whole darn' country will be an iceberg in a month or two, so we can't build till spring; but we could use your store, couldn't we, through the winter?"

Clif, attacking steak with more normality, admitted that he could keep the store as long as he pleased.

"That'll save time," commented Henry Nye, enjoying cornbread. "We'll get some machines to be run by foot-power or electricity, and rush through some

samples. Also, we'll find out in that way what kind of machinery we'll need, so that we can have it by spring, as soon as part of the factory is ready. Now, another thing! I've got my finger on a man that I think would be a prime assistant for you. He's an expert draughtsman; he's had art training; he's been in an architect's office; and he's been in several lines that have put him in touch with the toy market. He could make draughts from your models and advise us on the machinery we'll need. Besides, he could check you up on what's new, and what has already been done. If he sounds good to you, I'll wire him to come on."

"He sounds good," ruminated Clif, "but expensive."

Henry Nye laughed at the renewed worriment in Clif's face. "Hasten the day when dollars don't look so big to you!" he said. "A cheap man could ruin the whole enterprise. You and I aren't competent to manage alone; we have to have expert advice and help. I've agreed to this fellow's terms of ten thousand a year in case you approve."

Clif, who had made a sturdy beginning on pumpkin pie, dropped his fork with an eloquent clatter. He looked at Henry Nye in amazement. "Ten thousand a year—in Hampton! Why, Mr. Nye, you could charge admission to see him. That's never been heard of."

"Mighty fine pie!" declared the older man placidly. "It won't do Hampton any harm if we haul in a new thought for it. But we've got to get busy right away, before the cold weather sets in. What are you going to do this evening?"

"I must go out to see Mrs. Davenway at once," said

Clif, with a mental eye on the service she had rendered him.

"Oh, yes. A beautiful woman!"

"She's wonderful," subscribed Clif heartily. "She's fine and true."

"She's beautiful," repeated Henry Nye firmly.

Clif lifted his eyes at the intensity of this encomium, but was so much more astonished by the deep abstraction in the older man's countenance that he dropped his gaze quickly, as one does who has seen too much.

When Clif went down the hotel steps, he felt giddy. Everything was unreal. The old dreary routine was swept away. A path of endless possibilities stretched before him. But how awkward and inexpressive he had been, how galvanized by utter stupefaction! His appreciation had been so deep that it had refused to make the long trip to the surface.

And it was still incredible. Hampton would never have helped him, would never have had the faith and courage, would never have cared whether a new enterprise was started in its midst or not. The factory would call in workmen—skilled workmen, who would be a real addition to the town. But Hampton would not have helped itself to greater life and newer purposes. It had been left to a man from another section to come in here and add to the business activity and make it possible to send the name of Hampton Valley broadcast over the country on various manufactured articles. That was strange.

In front of the courthouse he met Lem Tripe, who stopped and emitted the salutation considered most fitting.

"Hello, stranger. Gorry sakes, you been makin' a splurge, hain't you?"

"Why, no," disclaimed Clif, not in the least understanding the charge, "I've been quieter than——"

"Ye-uh, I should say!" interrupted the jocular Mr. Tripe. "Quiet like nothin'! Here your swell friend's been plowin' up the town 'cause you didn't get back. I gol, how'd you nail him, Clif? And then Heth—well, Heth, she takes the cake."

Clif's heart stopped. What did Lem Tripe mean? And how could he ask? Fortunately, Lem was a good monologist.

"Once get Heth started, and I gol, ain't her equal for action in the hull of Spinooski County. I kinda thought you was takin' a back seat, Clif, but you sure got her stirred, all right. You should ha' been here that day she stuck her claws in. I tell you, there was fur and feathers flyin' all over Railroad Street. I was lucky 'nough to be in Wylie's office part o' the time—and, b'lieve me, man, she walked right over me and never saw me 't all. Seems she'd just been tellin' Wylie where he got off, and she was a-stompin' out on her way to the bank. Then Bill Capron, he was in the bank when she came outa Judevine's office, and he was standin' by her elbow when she passed in the mazuma to your account. Bill, he read the deposit slip upside down." Mr. Tripe paused for another breath.

Clif said nothing. He could not trust himself to speak. He was glad it was dark; glad, too, that the shadow of a tree shielded his face from the street light. Otherwise his expression might have disturbed the course of Mr. Tripe's reminiscences.

"Hampton's been on edge 'bout it," continued Lem

happily. "Us, o' course we couldn't hardly help puttin' things together—and gosh! Heth had a right to break with Wylie if she wanted to, but looks like she wasn't thinkin' which side her bread was buttered on. She'll go a long ways 'thout doin' better. They fit somep'n turrible. I could hear a word now and then when I could get near the door. I'll bet Wylie could chew nails 'cause she paid your mortgage. That's 'nough to make a man sore. I gol!"

Clif had ceased to hear Lem Tripe's voice at all. White-hot thoughts were racing through his brain.

In an absorption so deep that it detached him from every object around him, he went on toward Checker Street.

CHAPTER XLIII

SPARK ambled out of the village on the road to Kenner Falls. He knew from the hand that rested on his neck that he was being actively loved and that it would be safe to go as slowly as he pleased. Heather cared little how he went or where he went, except that she reined him into one crossroad after another, that they might meet as few people as possible.

The country was gorgeous in the richest of its autumn colors. The maple groves were gay splashings of red and gold, brilliant against the dark blue of mountains. On the most exposed slopes the leaves had fallen, and the pointed tips of the spruces stood out vividly green among gray branches. Sumacs, in small companies, were stripped except for their wine-red plumes. The cold hand of the frost had smitten the leaves of the blackberries into burning scarlet, the leaves of the poplars into clear yellow, the goldenrods into gray searness, but had passed by the mullein and the sweet flag and the hardy yarrow. The cat-tails were brown in the swamps, and the milkweeds on every hill had opened their pods, spilling their seeds in a silken tangle, white as snow.

Heather's dark eyes deepened as fresh views of this autumn beauty met her at every turn—this last gay riot before the winter mantle descended. It was so ex-

quisite that it caught one's breath, and so sad that it stirred one's heart. She wondered if she would ever see these things again—the white birches bending over the edge of Nelly's Pond and painting their own silvery trunks on its brown surface, the flaming red of a rock maple like a crimson stain on the hill, the orange gold of the pumpkins in the field among the pale yellow shocks of corn. . . .

Beautiful, yes; but why did they make her feel sad? Why was her mind full of *ever* and *never?* She had succeeded in putting through the plan that had brought her back to Hampton, but she had no feeling of victory.

She was astonished to find that now, with all preparations made for New York, she had no more zest in the going than her mother had. Recently her mind had been so occupied with human values and the vital importance of human relationships that all sense of geographical location had dropped away. How could it matter, she asked now, where one lived, any more than it mattered to the rose what vase might hold it? She had been sure that Hampton Valley was a most inauspicious setting for a happy existence. Now she could see that she had been exaggerating the importance of externalities in attaching so much power to any setting.

She was inclined to think that there was no such thing as an ideal community—that it was as tantalizing and as unattainable as inter-planetary communication or perpetual motion. Community life swings to one side or the other of the ideal, but never touches it, although sometimes it comes rather close. The small town is one extreme; the large city, the other. The first over-emphasizes the importance of the individual; the second, the importance of the community. If it

were possible to determine the size of the aggregate in which the individual and the community would be in the proper relation to insure each its legitimate development, then one of the greatest problems of community life would have been solved.

From every community there is an emanation—a subtle, pervasive miasma that bears a relation to mob spirit but is more elusive and not so readily apprehended as a by-product of the crowd. It is characteristic of both the city and the small town, but its power is gauged. The weak natures give in to it and become largely reflections of the community effluvium; but the strong natures are untouched by it and continue to function in a stratum that is free and uncontaminated.

Heather thought of her mother, of Mrs. Judevine, the Bigelows, the Elliots, a dozen others. They were essentially independent of their environment—*of* Hampton Valley, but not conquered by it. Was it possible that she had been thinking of herself as so weak that she must choose her community carefully, expecting to be overborne by it? Why had she not seen that the problem of the individual is to strengthen himself, so that he may be able to live his own life anywhere, with no dependent reference to his surroundings?

She felt very humble.

"What have I done this summer, anyhow?" she meditated gloomily. She thought a long time, and could find no cheerful answer to her question. "Well, I suppose I did help Miss Leathers to believe in herself. But what else? I haven't even been able to make the town call me Heather. Lem Tripe will believe I'm Heth to the end of his days. . . . I haven't been able to admire Hampton thoroughly, and I haven't been able

to dislike Hampton. I've jumped from one feeling to the other, and back again. . . . I've mixed up my own life till I don't know what I want, or how to find out what I want. . . . I've made mother wretched, and I'm not happy myself."

And how was she going to give up Spark? She patted his satiny neck affectionately, and he turned his head and gave her a wise look out of big brown eyes. He trusted her, and she was going to play him false. Who could know the desolation that he might feel when his own family deserted him, even though he were favored and well cared for? The tears gathered in her eyes every time she turned toward Hampton Valley. And then every time she reined Spark about and delayed the moment of parting.

It grew twilight, and Heather was still vacillating, patrolling crossroads in the neighborhood of the village, starting for Hampton, turning about. . . . The October night fell softly about her. She was on Fanning Heights when the street lights came on in Hampton, twinkling through the partially denuded trees.

"I can't. Dear old Spark, I can't," she sobbed on his neck.

She dismounted, let down the bars into a pasture, and led her horse some little distance back from the road, to a spot that had always been a favorite with her. She climbed a low bank, calling the obedient Spark to stand just below her. Sitting there on the bank, she was on a level with his head. She fondled his velvet nose and whispered devotion into his ear.

Spark was plainly puzzled. He had been through a good many emotional crises with his young mistress,

but this was the strangest. Nevertheless, he stood patiently, thoughtfully crunching the sugar which Heather occasionally meted out to him from her pocket.

A heavy dew had been falling, but the air was warm and Heather's riding habit was heavy, so she felt no chill. And she seemed as far as ever from going down into Hampton and giving up this pet of her childhood. She could not do it.

No sooner had darkness covered the world than the moon came up over Hemlock Knob and sent its light down over the valley, glorifying everyday objects with silver magic. It was the harvest moon, Heather thought dolefully—the most melancholy moon in all the year. Instead of strengthening her by its calm, full beauty, it increased the poignancy of the ordeal ahead of her.

With a start she sat up straight. She had made out the figure of a man moving along the road. With no irresolution, he let down the bars and came directly toward her, as if sure of his objective.

When he drew nearer, she felt an enormous relief.

"Oh Clif!" she cried. "Did mother send you after me?"

"No," he returned quietly, "but she thinks it's time you came back. I brought your coat. She said you'd taken Spark——"

"How did you know where to find me?" she marveled.

"I knew because of the puppies."

She was touched that he had remembered. It had crossed her mind several times that she was practically repeating an episode in her childhood. It had happened when she was eight years old. Rags, a mongrel dog

belonging to the Minks, had produced three indifferent pups, still a generation further advanced on the path of mongrelity. From her own yard Heather, to whom all dogs were friends, had overheard Charlie Mink vowing to dispose of the pups; so while the Minks were at supper she had stolen into their barn, secured the pups in her apron, and fled, followed by the anxious Rags. Having put some distance between herself and the danger of pursuit, she had made a thorough canvass of one end of the village. No one needed pups. Panic-stricken by failure, she had wandered up to Fanning Heights, and then on to this spot. Here she had stayed. To go back was to offer up three soft young lives and presumably to crack Rags's heart.

So Heather had sat on the bank, afraid to return, afraid of the dark that settled around her, but fiercely determined to save these little dogs by breaking a link in the chain of circumstances. Solicitude and terrified loneliness had kept her awake through long hours. Half the men in the village had been out searching for her. Every little while she saw their lanterns swinging along the road. But it was not until midnight that they found her, and then only because Rags had given a yelp of utter bewilderment. The prominence which the pups had attained had opened homes to them, but Heather could recall only ignominy for herself.

Clif climbed the bank and put the coat around her shoulders.

"Are you ready to go back?" he asked.

"Clif, I can't go back," she burst out. "Do you know what it would mean? It would mean giving up this dear old fellow, and just see how he loves me and trusts me!"

Clif dropped down beside her.

"Very well," he said cheerfully, "we'll sit here and watch him together."

Relieved that he did not urge her to return at once, she gave Spark a few inches more rein and looked around at Clif with a casual question on her lips. The moonlight was full in his face, and she forgot her question, amazed at his expression.

"Why, Clif," she exclaimed, "you don't look the same."

"Don't I?" he smiled. "How different?"

"You look——" She hesitated— "why, bigger— and free somehow."

He laughed. "What a penetrating young person you are! You are right. I am free. For the first time in my life, I'm free. Tomorrow morning I'm going to look the world straight in the face and see how it seems. And yet it's a strange thing, Heather—the happiest thing about being free is being tied. And already I'm tied."

Then he told her about the factory, about this opportunity that had come to his very door to do the thing that he had long wanted to do.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she said softly. "And so glad that it is Mr. Nye! Mother likes him. She thinks he's a fine man."

"Does she?" returned Clif with some significance, recalling the abstracted look that he had surprised on Henry Nye's face.

"Yes," continued Heather, totally oblivious of undercurrents. "And mother seems to know about people. She seems to know about everything."

"Your mother is a wonderful woman," Clif put in simply.

"I know she is. She's wonderful and sweet—and she's got the worst daughter that ever lived. I—I believe I'm wicked all through. Wait! I'm going to tell you. I've got to tell somebody. Do you know what I thought when I came back to Hampton Valley? I thought I'd trained myself out of my heredity, that I'd been improving myself until I was poised and rationalized and independent. I was proud of it. I was sorry for mother because she hadn't had advantages. I was going to take her out of this little town and—and train her. How do you suppose I could be such a—such a fool? Why, mother's miles ahead of me. She's all those things that I thought I was, and I—I'm not a single one of 'em."

"I think," said Clif gently, "that you were only admiring your mother more than you realized. You had remembered her qualities and adopted them as your ideal."

"That doesn't excuse me, because if I'd had any sense I should have known—— Why, you can't build up character by plastering things on from the outside, and all I'd been doing was to live in externals. Mother's real, from the inside. Think of my fancying that I'd improved on my heredity! Oh, I'm humbly grateful to be related to her at all."

"Heather, you're exaggerating. You haven't really——"

"I have, too," she interrupted unsteadily. "I've done everything wrong. Now I've made mother sell the house and I'm dragging her away, and she's heart-

"I'M NOT LAUGHING AT YOU, HEATHER; I'M LOVING YOU."

broken over it. But she's kind and sweet and poised, and she doesn't blame me because we're going."

"Well, why go?" Clif interposed.

"Why go? My gracious, Clif, it's the plan that brought me back, and I must hold firm to something. There's another thing! Mother says I'm impulsive; she says that's why I'm so sure about everything as I come to it. And all the time I thought she was the one who acted on feelings instead of reason, and that I——"

"Well, Heather, anyone who finds out that you've been sitting here in this pasture for heaven knows how long, because you can't bring yourself to give up Spark, will know that you are ruled only by your head."

"Clif Stanleigh, how can you laugh at me?"

His voice changed. "I'm not laughing at you, Heather; I'm loving you."

She did not move. She was looking down at the bridle-rein held loosely between her fingers, and her mouth was touched by the melancholy that her self-blame had roused. In the mellow light of the moon her face was ethereally beautiful, very young and sweetly wistful.

"I love your impulsiveness," Clif went on. "I love you for being you, just as I've loved you ever since I can remember. . . . You've known that, haven't you?"

She did not look up, did not stir.

"Heather, tell me that you love me."

"Yes, Clif," she said, in a very small voice. "But I never dreamed it till—a few days ago." It was the

nearest they came to mentioning the battle she had fought for him. "I thought I—only liked you."

He drew her into his arms and kissed her cheek. Her eyes were still downcast, but her hand stole into his and she dropped her head on his breast with the exquisite gesture of one who gives up a struggle and yields for the first time to the utter coördination through joy which acknowledges the beloved dominion.

He spoke softly. "Darling, kiss me."

She lifted her lips—as simply as a child might, but with a woman's surrender.

"My little Heather," he breathed, as he held her close. "I can't think life without you."

A gleam of sauciness sparkled across her face. "Aren't you afraid of me, Clif, if you think I'm impulsive?"

"No," he said, and his low voice was vibrant with feeling, "because this time you're not impulsive. You and I have loved each other since we were children."

They were silent then, communing soul to soul, conscious of the harmony and peace and joy that are too deep for words.

"Mother will wonder," Heather said at length.

"Yes, she'll be anxious. We must go."

He slid down the bank and held out his hands. She smiled into his face as he caught her; then turned.

"Come, Spark," she called happily, "we're going back to Hampton Valley."

THE END